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The University of Southern Mississippi

UPDIKE, MORRISON, AND ROTH: THE POLITICS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

by

Christopher Steven Love

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

December 2013

ABSTRACT

UPDIKE, MORRISON, AND ROTH: THE POLITICS OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

by Christopher Steven Love

December 2013

My dissertation analyzes American identity in the works of John Updike, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth. Specifically, I examine American identity in Updike's *Rabbit* tetralogy (1960-1990); Morrison's trilogy of novels *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998); and Roth's trilogy comprising the novels *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000). The studied texts of these three novelists, I argue, attack national myths and undermine exclusive narratives that are incongruent with the nation's ideal identity as a pluralistic and democratic nation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION: JOHN UPDIKE, TONI MORRISON, PHILIP ROTH AND “THE AMERICAN CENTURY”	1
II. JOHN UPDIKE’S RABBIT TETRALOGY: RABBIT AND AMERICA’S SHARED IDENTITY CRISIS.....	32
<i>Rabbit Angstrom</i> in Context <i>Rabbit, Run</i> and America’s Protestant Legacies <i>Rabbit Redux</i> : Rabbit’s Tangled Garden <i>Rabbit is Rich</i> : “Running out of Gas” or Second Win? <i>Rabbit at Rest</i> : Rabbit and Reagan, Dream Men	
III. TONI MORRISON’S TRILOGY: CULTURAL TRAUMA AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY.....	136
Toni Morrison’s Trilogy in Context <i>Beloved</i> : The Spectacle and the Chronotope of the Ship <i>Jazz</i> : The Limits of Allegory and the Chronotope of the City <i>Paradise</i> : Myth and Ritual	
IV. PHILIP ROTH’S AMERICAN TRILOGY: ZUCKERMAN’S PASTORAL ELEGY.....	198
Philip Roth’s American Trilogy in Context <i>American Pastoral</i> : The Price of Myth <i>I Married a Communist</i> : American and Jewish Identity Reconciled? <i>The Human Stain</i> : Arcadia Asunder	
V. CODA.....	263
WORKS CITED.....	270

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

JOHN UPDIKE, TONI MORRISON, PHILIP ROTH AND “THE AMERICAN
CENTURY”

On February 17, 1941 Henry Luce, creator of the popular and influential American magazines *Time*, *Fortune*, and *Life*, published an essay titled “The American Century.” Advocating America’s entry in World War II, Luce argued that the United States was already at war and that the nation should use the war as an opportunity to spread democracy and to replace Britain as the leader of the free world. Luce framed his argument for American dominance by invoking one of the country’s foundational myths: that America was destined to become the world’s shining example of freedom and democratic republicanism:

[This] nation, conceived in adventure and dedicated to the progress of man - this nation cannot truly endure unless there courses strongly through its veins from Maine to California the blood of purposes and enterprise and high resolve. Throughout the 17th Century and the 18th Century and the 19th Century, this continent teemed with manifold projects and magnificent purposes. Above them all and weaving them all together into the most exciting flag of all the world and of all history was the triumphal purpose of freedom. It is in this spirit that all of us are called, each to his own measure of capacity, and each in the widest horizon of his vision, to create the first great American Century. (Luce 65)

Although Luce couched his plan in humanitarian terms (“We must undertake now to be the Good Samaritan of the entire world”), he declared that the United States had a right “for such purposes as we see fit . . . to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence” (Luce 64).

By invoking a foundational American myth, Luce attempts to tie his very practical definition of American identity to its ideal identity as a beacon of freedom and democratic republicanism. National identity stems from what a nation imagines it shares in common, and a nation’s myths often play an important role in the making of a nation’s identity (Anderson 6). A national myth may be derived from actual historical events, but the contexts for these events are ignored, or as Ernest Renan and Benedict Anderson put it, national myths require its members to forget details of history in order to make the myth function as desired. Therefore, national myths dehistoricize historical events and reorganize them into a grand narrative that serves as a transcending and controlling story for the rest of the nation. I use “grand narrative” in the general meaning of Jean-Francois Lyotard from *The Postmodern Condition*. In this sense, a grand narrative, or alternately “metanarrative,” is a type of sweeping narrative meant to tell the story of a nation, totalize and universalize the national experience, and legitimize policies as leading to the destined outcome of the nation’s “story.” Thus, the policy itself, as in the example of Luce’s essay, is framed to become a part of the narrative. The grand narrative may be the originating myth or a derivative from it that supports the overarching myth. Thus, the myth is often invoked to justify, explain, or decide the nation’s policies and actions. National myths, then, are ideological narratives through which a nation state derives a

core set of political and cultural values that seek to unite its people.¹ From these values, expressed and enacted in law, culture, and social expectations, paradigms for concepts of a nation's identity come into being. Ideally, members of the nation, then, also adhere to the paradigms and, thus, signify that they belong to that nation. One result of a national identity is that the nation will set out to fulfill its identity through its political and legal policies. Therefore, the nation uses its apparatuses in order to enforce such policies. As members of the nation who adhere to the paradigms of national identity, the people support and help enforce the nation's missions. Thus, the application and enforcement of such policies would reveal a nation's practical, or to borrow from Louis Althusser, its material identity, or its identity as reflected by its actual practices, which might be either in accordance with or in opposition to its ideals. But national identities are problematic first because conflicting national narratives often pervade a nation and second because of disconnect between its material identity and ideal identity (the harmony between a nation's practices and its ideals). In addition, people of a nation interpret the meanings of a nation's practices differently with respect to the ideal.

This has been especially true in the United States. American identity is a complex concept since competing narratives not only emanate from conflicting political parties and the cacophony of mass media but also from the nation's tremendously large and diverse population. In order to bolster definitions of American identity, powerful factions (i.e., political, business) often invoke the nation's myths in order to align a definition with the nation's ideals, such as freedom and individual rights. However, how they use and interpret these myths is often arbitrary in order to impose the will of those who wield the

¹ By "nation state," I mean a politically sovereign nation, such as the United States, in which many of its people believe that they share basic common values and customs.

power to enforce their definition for their varying purposes, even if their purposes are unfaithful to the ideal that they invoke (as Luce's essay exemplifies). Second, versions of America's identity are derived from distinct groups of people who each conceptualized America differently, such as the seventeenth-century Calvinist Puritans and eighteenth century Enlightenment founders. Therefore, America's foundational ideological narratives even contrast with one another. As Sacvan Bercovitch notes, for example, the "American self" (as he calls it) reflects a mixture of both the religious and the secular. Certainly, the Puritans specifically understood America as the prophesied land they interpreted from scripture, but resistance to Puritan interpretation is as much a part of America's Protestant history as its millennialist tendencies (Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, 137). In addition, throughout the nation's history many laws of the United States have defined American identity along racial, ethnic, gender, and economic lines in direct contrast to the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the basic rights delineated in the Constitution's Bill of Rights. Since the late eighteenth century, the history of American identity has been the struggle to align the nation's material identity with its ideal identity as expressed in these founding documents.

As derived from the Declaration of Independence, American identity is historically unique because it established the supremacy of unalienable rights and equality as the foundation of a nation; these "truths," as Thomas Jefferson put it, would be codified twelve years later in the Bill of Rights.² This Jeffersonian American identity does not come through a national myth but from a set of ideals. Indeed, historian Garrett

² Although he did not attend the Constitutional Convention, Jefferson argued that a bill of rights was essential to the success of the nation, and his thinking persuaded James Madison to include a bill of rights in the Constitution.

Ward Sheldon explains that in writings before the Declaration of Independence Jefferson had first attempted to justify the American Revolution on mythic terms—that America was trying to return to the “Ancient Constitution” of the pre-Norman Anglo-Saxons. But the Ancient Constitution was a myth, a narrative that conceptualized pre-Norman England as a prelapsarian realm, the “golden age of English liberty” (Sheldon 26). This myth first had been used to help seventeenth-century parliamentarians “beat the traditionalists at their own game by situating their historical claim to liberty in a period antedating the monarchy” (27). By the late eighteenth century, the myth was being recognized as dubious at best. Therefore, when it came time to write the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson realized that the mythical justification for the American Revolution could not reasonably hold. As a result, Jefferson justified the revolution philosophically, based on Lockean principles of natural rights (40).

Therefore, as derived from these founding documents, American identity is not predicated on a shared ethnicity, race, language, religion, or even history as with many nations. Instead, with equality and basic rights as its foundation, the nation embraces its plurality, and its democratic republican government is conducive to such an ideal. Since national identity is based on what a nation imagines it shares in common, American identity, despite the differences among the nation’s people, rests in the belief in the unifying concepts of equality, democratic republicanism, and that people’s rights as articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights must receive equal protection under the law.

However, this idealistic American identity has had to compete with an array of conflicting concepts and narratives that are and seem counter to the ideal. Jefferson

himself embodied such contradictions because he attempted to circumvent the subjugation of African Americans by reasoning that they did not qualify as fully human, and his paternalistic views toward women prevented him from imagining women as equal to men. Jefferson's concepts of race and gender typify some of the bases for slavery and racist and sexist laws. In addition, America's national myths often show a reconceptualization of the nation's idealistic notions. Therefore, these national myths can be used to form grand narratives that threaten to override the nation's ideal identity.

For example, in Luce's invocation of an American myth, Luce alludes to Jefferson's notion of an "empire of liberty" in which Jefferson envisioned the eventual expansion of democratic republican principles—Jefferson's version of America's ideal identity. However, as historian Bernhard Sheehan explains, Jefferson did not mean this expansion to be imperialistic, nationalistic, or militaristic in nature since this would be in opposition to his democratic republican ideals. Instead, Jefferson believed that "republicanism transcended any particular nation" and that by example the United States would inspire other nations to replicate democratic republican principles within their own borders (Sheehan 354). Second, Jefferson imagined this phenomenon only occurring in the Western Hemisphere so that the US would have good relationships with neighboring countries (354). Thus, a very practical idea like Jefferson's becomes mythical once it becomes part of the nation's story and purpose and emptied of historical context, as in Luce's handling. Luce creates a grand narrative for the "American Century" that is distinct from Jefferson's meaning in at least this regard: Luce believed that the United States had a right to go wherever it wanted to go and do whatever it wanted to do in order to spread democracy and capitalism throughout the world.

According to Luce, Americans could no longer practice isolationism, a mistake, he asserts, that the United States had made at the end of World War I and had continued to make under President Franklin Roosevelt. Luce's essay proved prophetic. After the war, his vision played out through the United States' simultaneously defensive, aggressive, and interventionist foreign policy as articulated by President Harry Truman in what became known as the Truman Doctrine. While President Truman announced his administration's plan to protect "free peoples" against "armed minorities" or "outside pressures," the United States was already involved in the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), a war between government and communist factions (Truman). It also had enacted the Marshall Plan in Europe and continued to occupy Japan. In addition, Truman, ignoring Ho Chi Minh's plea for the US to aid Vietnam's struggle against colonialism, supported France's claim to Indochina. In the Korean War (1950-1953), the United States would pay a heavy price for its first hot war against communism, losing almost as many men in the three years of fighting as it did in nearly a decade of the Vietnam War. Indeed, Gail McDonald explains that "Luce laid out a controversial agenda that would continue to affect American politics for the remainder of the century" (177). Therefore, Luce's grand narrative helped frame a new national identity for the remainder of the twentieth century by appropriating America's ideals and reconceptualizing them for his geopolitical ambitions for the United States.

Although Luce's version of America's identity affected American policies throughout the twentieth century, variations of American identity proliferated in the aftermath of World War II. In order to complement America's new identity as a global power, a conglomeration of government, corporate, and scientific interests exhaustively

sought to establish, once and for all, a cohesive American identity in order to prevent disloyalty, the spread of communism, and racial discord and to stabilize economic prosperity. The government invested an unprecedented amount of time and effort sponsoring studies, broadcasts, and campaigns designed to define essential elements of American identity as a way to counter Nazi and communist political ideologies.³ Such paradigms of American identity include patriotic consumerism, traditional religiosity, capitalism, tranquil suburban domesticity, global hegemony, vague notions of individualism, and American exceptionalism. Disseminated by various media and institutional outlets such as radio, television, film, print publications, and academia, such nationalist propaganda pervaded American culture to such an extent that leading intellectuals and publications (Luce's, for example, and *Reader's Digest*) began to describe postwar Americans as "homogenous," united by common values who shared "traditional beliefs" (Karl 22).⁴ Media theorist Armand Mattelart explains that "few countries asked as much as the United States of their apparatuses of mass communication . . . [to] become the very cornerstone of a project of mass integration" (71). Indeed, through manipulation, regulation, and outright intimidation of communicative sources, the government and complicit industries were able to transmit characteristics of American identity that were consistent with their goal of national unity.⁵ Augmenting the drive toward a comprehensive national identity were postwar historians who "discovered a new national consensus" and saw America as a unified society that had begun to fully

³ Although Nazi Germany was defeated, in the postwar years there remained fears that fascism might persist and remnants of Nazism might coalesce. Orson Welles's 1946 film *The Stranger* dramatizes such anxieties.

⁴ For example, Karl refers to those who participated in two symposiums on American culture in the early 1950s for the *Partisan Review* (e.g., Lionel Trilling, David Riesman, etc.)

⁵ The House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) infamous investigation into the supposed communist infiltration of Hollywood serves as a prime example of government coercion of a particular medium.

realize the promise of the country's founding: a classless American society devoid of any real ideological divisions (Iggers 43). As Tom Englehardt argues in *The End of Victory Culture*, the US's global victory bolstered the myth of American superiority as never before, effectively building "a national consciousness" that appeared "so natural, so innocent" and "little contradicted by the realities of invasion or defeat" that soon gave way to "triumphalist despair" when the Cold War began (5, 9). The government and other nationalist organizations' rush to establish authentic paradigms of American identity after World War II was initially designed to corral disparate ethnic and racial groups under one red, white, and blue banner of American-ness.⁶ Luce's essay was, in fact, prescient. The propaganda was not limited to the postwar period, but spread throughout and beyond the Cold War, regaining momentum with the onset of the Reagan Era.⁷ Indeed, President Reagan and his administration attempted to recapture a lost American essence by dusting off themes of American identity from the immediate postwar period. The protests against the Vietnam War had exposed many Americans' fatigue with the incessant ideological and military struggle with communism and the *us vs. them* mentality and propaganda of the Cold War. Additionally, the Civil Rights Movement gave voice to underrepresented Americans who felt that the United States was itself an oppressive nation ruled by a white male elite and that therefore needed dramatic changes to its fundamental systems of

⁶Such organizations included the Council for Democracy and the Common Council for American Unity, both established circa 1940.

⁷Sean Wilentz argues that Reagan's legacy has been far reaching, and he posits that President Clinton's election in 1992 was not the end of the Reagan Era for several reasons. First, Reagan led the conservative resurgence in the United States beginning with his presidential candidacy in 1974 and the continuation of many of Reagan's policies (e.g., a robust, heavily funded US military; the Republican Party's now dogmatic creed of low taxes and limited social programs). His book *The Age of Reagan* stretches the Reagan Era time frame from 1974-2008, a period that encompassed two of John Updike's Rabbit novels and the entire trilogies of Toni Morrison and Philip Roth. Reagan's attempt to return to the atmosphere of the postwar era, thus, demonstrates the impact of the cultural and political climate of the end of World War II.

governance. But the Reagan Era ushered in the resurgence of a nationalist conservatism that once again deemed communism to be the country's chief enemy, encouraged a robust military buildup, targeted civil rights legislation for repeal, and sought to deregulate the financial industry. Reagan's mantra was an idealized American past, America before the social tumult of the 1960s (Combs 76).⁸ Consequently, Reagan wanted to return to a national identity that predated the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.⁹

Because of World War II, American identity became for the first time the subject of academic inquiry. Although sporadic studies of the American character had been periodically published throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Philip Gleason explains that the circumstances of World War II led to the proliferation of studies that sought to define and understand the nation (Gleason, "Americans All: World War II and the Shaping of American Identity," 505). The US government and scholars, for example, obsessed over the concept of American individualism, and the government coerced the film industry to portray a prescribed brand of individualism, mainly in economic terms, while J. Edgar Hoover manipulated his Hollywood connections to spread propaganda through American movies (Noakes 662; Wills 245). In addition, Carl Bernstein discovered that at the onset of the Cold War the government, sometimes in cooperation with editors and journalists, planted CIA agents throughout the American media, such as in *The New York Times* and

⁸ Reagan also vetoed the Civil Rights Restoration Act in 1988; however, Congress overrode his veto.

⁹ Reagan's idol was President Franklin Roosevelt. James Combs notes that Reagan blamed President Lyndon Johnson and his Great Society, not FDR, for instituting an American welfare state. However, Combs argues that Reagan often criticized Johnson for what were New Deal initiatives and praised FDR for what were Johnson's programs.

the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) (Bernstein 66).¹⁰ According to Bernstein, Henry Luce was among many powerful media figures “who lent their cooperation to the Agency” (Bernstein 66). In addition to Luce’s publications, other popular magazines like *Reader’s Digest* were heavily influenced by government propaganda. *Reader’s Digest* often took cues from the CIA; many of its articles, for example, featured stories celebrating various versions of individualism to contrast with beliefs about communism (Sharp 13, 21). Abigail Cheever cites such works as David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), and R.D. Laing’s *The Divided Self* (1960) as examples from a deluge of studies undertaken to examine and seek out a definable national identity that would contain the dissent among the American population building throughout the postwar period.

Philip Gleason notes that scientists were the first to ploy the term “identity” beginning in the postwar era (“Identifying Identity,” 910-11). Eschewing the phrase “American character,” scientists such as Erik Erikson coined “identity” to explain how America’s multi-ethnic, multi-racial population might be reconciled in a singular way. In *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erikson’s work explores the psychological relationship between the individual and society, using and popularizing the term “identity” to such an extent that it quickly became the new buzz-word among scholars across disciplines. Identity, Erikson explains, is difficult to define because it involves “a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities” (qtd. in Gleason, “Identifying Identity,” 914). Erikson’s efforts to reconfigure identity in an era when

¹⁰ Philip Roth declared that the postwar generation was “the most propagandized” generation in American history (qtd. in Stanley 1).

Americans were reimagining their own cultural, social, and political identity are not coincidental. During World War II, Erikson had contributed to a US government study on the effectiveness of propaganda, and his reexamination of identity began during the war when a group of scholars were employed and encouraged by agencies of the United States to study propaganda and embark on wide-ranging national character studies (Gleason, "Identifying Identity," 925). Erikson's chapter "Reflections on American Identity" from *Childhood and Society* posits that inconsistencies in the national narrative have helped create identity crises in Americans since they are torn between "dynamic polarities" such as "individualistic and standardized" (Erikson 286). However, Erikson concludes that these polarities can be reconciled through America's participatory democracy because individuals could have a say in politics that affected them while experiencing "fraternal congregation" of the political process (319). The idea of an untouchable core identity reconcilable in the American democracy was important because it maintained the uniqueness of each person, a concept of individualism that such scientists emphatically touted as essential to American identity and, when seen in the Cold War context, as evidence of the unnaturalness of communism and autocracy.

Abigail Cheever, author of *Real Phonies: Cultures of Authenticity in Post World War II America*, traces this concern for American authenticity to the Emersonian and Thoreauvian traditions that celebrate "a particularly American individuality that was conceived in opposition to the expectations of a social world" (2). Furthermore, in American ideology, according to Gregory Jay, "identity is personal, idiosyncratic, something we do not share. Seeing oneself as a cultural identity tends to erode the feeling of uniqueness so prized in American culture" (115). Cheever and Frederic Karl describe a

backlash against this culture of conformity by many American literary writers of the period. “Everything depended on keeping a public united in the Cold War,” Karl asserts, and “the media organized [Americans] around stereotypes;” the “American sameness” produced “counterfeit” selves that masked the real individual underneath (Karl 37).

Cheever and Karl explain that literature during the 1950s and 1960s exhibited a fascination with “authentic” identities and derided what writers saw as fraudulence and phoniness. Indeed, Robert Langbaum observes in *The Mysteries of Identity: A Theme in Modern Literature* (1977) that by the 1970s the United States had become “an identity society” in which individuals struggled to define themselves against the wave of nationalist propaganda that swept the country throughout the Cold War (3). Thus, the concerted effort to establish a “national identity” by the US government and the American media produced a counteraction in America’s literary writers. In the 1950s and 60s, the US was in full identity crisis mode, reeling from a confluence of events and national traumas: the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War. Kennedy’s assassination and the growing Civil Rights Movement, highlighted by Martin Luther King’s 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, shattered any illusion of a stable nation that had successfully corralled dissent.

Attempts to construct and direct a national identity, therefore, did not go smoothly as the rush to define paradigms of American identity led to a reexamination of the nature of the country itself. Diverse American writers—from Ralph Ellison and Norman Mailer, to Adrienne Rich and Jack Kerouac—participated in this reexamination. Such writers worked to explore America’s ongoing identity crisis, both challenging and reinforcing

clichés of American individualism and exceptionalism while grappling with their country's new position as the West's emergent political, economic, and martial leader. Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1963) challenged the nationalistic representations of World War II that were common in Hollywood films from the 1940s to the 1960s (e.g., *Flying Tigers* [1942], *The Longest Day* [1962]). Several of Heller's characters, for example, are not patriotic warriors fighting for an idealistic American cause, but they are reluctant participants caught up in a deadly conflict beyond their control. Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) reached back to the tropes of the American Western myth to criticize the banality of suburban America. As much as the government and the media were obsessed with implementing a cohesive national identity, writers such as Saul Bellow and James Baldwin and later the emerging writers Philip Roth, John Updike, and Toni Morrison persistently produced works that sought to recover a "discoverable authenticity" that was beyond the propaganda (Karl 29). Roth's short stories such as "Goodbye, Columbus," "Defender of the Faith," and "Eli the Fanatic" (1959) represent the dilemma for Jews torn between "authentic" Jewishness and their American identity, a theme to which he returned in his American trilogy beginning with *American Pastoral* (1997). Updike begins the Rabbit tetralogy, or *Rabbit Angstrom*, with the publication of *Rabbit, Run* (1960). Covering thirty years (1959-1989) of American history, the Rabbit tetralogy explores Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's lifelong struggle to uncover his authentic self that is drowning beneath cultural and political noise. Morrison's writing career begins later (in 1970), but her early novels build on themes of identity, leading to the commencement of her trilogy in 1987 with *Beloved*.

Specifically, this dissertation examines American identity in John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom* (1960-1990); Toni Morrison's trilogy of novels *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998); and Philip Roth's American trilogy comprising the novels *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000).¹¹ First, these novelists seek to destroy narratives that attempt to codify exclusive concepts of American identity. In addition, the novels identify varying brands of American identity construed by competing interests and powers and explore the nexus from which meanings of American identity emanate. Furthermore, they offer a thorough examination and critique of American identity from different perspectives, such as, but not limited to, Protestant, African American, and Jewish points of view. Ultimately, although from different vantage points and through different fictional scenarios, Updike, Morrison, and Roth attack the totalizing, mythic narratives that threaten America's ideals of equality, liberty, and democracy—and thus work to protect the integrity of America's identity as a democratic nation.

Through *Rabbit Angstrom*, for example, Updike dramatizes the core of Protestantism, individuals alone with their allusive God. For Updike, the political implications are very tangible, since individuals are left to their own conscience, and collectively through democracy, they can set limitations on government or use government to set practical but negotiable limits on individual freedoms and rights. Second, a private relationship to this allusive God means, for Updike, that ultimate

¹¹ Morrison and Roth have proclaimed that their sets of novels function as trilogies, and the scholarship addressing these works consistently acknowledges them as such (e.g., see Tally, Justine. "The Morrison Trilogy." *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007 and Schur, Richard. "Dream or Nightmare? Roth, Morrison, and America." *Philip Roth Studies* 1.1 [2005]: 19-36).

“Truth”—“the thing behind everything” as Rabbit states, remains inaccessible, and therefore individuals pursue truth on their own terms and according to their own consciences (*Rabbit, Run* 241). Although for a believer in God like Rabbit, that God may exist is a truth, and he may sense God intuitively; however, this truth is a private truth, something individuals are free to recognize or not recognize at all. Moreover, Rabbit both rebels against and accepts different national narratives, demonstrating both his independent spirit and susceptibility to political influence, but intuitively and through the help of other characters, Rabbit senses when his nation is out of balance with its ideals. Throughout the tetralogy, the novels also expose the limits of Rabbit’s knowledge and perspectives, and in *Rabbit Redux*, for instance, Skeeter’s history lessons show the need for other narratives to check prevailing ideology.

In her trilogy, Toni Morrison extensively examines this need for pluralistic narratives. For Morrison, memory, storytelling, and story gathering protect America from being dominated by what she refers to as the “official story” constructed by powerful white elites (Morrison, *Race-ing Justice. En-gendering Power*, x). Attacking what she refers to as the spectacle of narrative, Morrison combats the official story with alternate narratives. As exemplified by the character Pat Best in *Paradise*, Morrison dramatizes the need for black women to write, record, and interpret history. By countering the “official story,” blacks and women can decentralize the power held by those who attempt to control the narratives that enforce exclusive conceptions of American identity, such as those built on racist and sexist presumptions. For Morrison, it is not enough, though, to attack racist and sexist narratives. First, these narratives must be undone through analyses of how they function; her trilogy itself functions as a way to deconstruct and critique. But

more importantly, history must be reimagined and rewritten through the experiences of those who have been harmed by the nationalistic narratives that marginalize them.

Philip Roth echoes the importance of writing as a way to combat grand narratives. In Roth's American trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman, the trilogy's primary narrator, demonstrates the crucial role that the writer plays in American democracy. Although as a child he longed to lose his "ethnic" identity, Zuckerman realizes the importance of the skepticism he learned from his Jewish upbringing. Skepticism toward political narratives is essential to keep America from extremism and from an American identity that is exclusive and punitive for those that do not adhere to the given paradigms. For example, without America's plurality of perspectives, the ruling WASP establishment as exemplified by the Grants in *I Married a Communist* could push the nation toward a Nazi-like totalitarian state. Thus, the intellectual skepticism Zuckerman learned from his Jewish mentors and upbringing is essential to his critical view of nationalistic narratives, such as those that Rabbit Angstrom struggles to ward off.

Thus, these writers imagine American identity as democratic. Americans can help maintain the nation's ideal identity through their actions of self-discovery and struggles against conformity like Rabbit Angstrom and Joe and Violet Trace or, like Nathan Zuckerman and Pat Best, through the vigilance toward the grand narratives dictated to them by powerfully interested individuals and groups. Therefore, to more closely align America's material identity with its ideal identity, the nation needs its diverse members to participate and contribute in these various ways in order to resist exclusive concepts and definitions of the nation's identity.

As each of these writers indicates through these sets of novels, the postwar identity crisis dredged up many of America's subliminal divisions. Henry Luce's "The American Century" had overlooked America's domestic problems, such as institutional racism and sexism—the essay took for granted that the nation's house was in order. However, since many blacks, non-Anglo lower class and working class whites, Jews, and women felt marginalized in American society, they did not share Luce's enthusiasm for America's global aspirations nor did they trust attempts to homogenize American identity. Or if they did share this enthusiasm, such as Updike's and Roth's characters Rabbit Angstrom and Swede Levov, they became disillusioned by either the air of conformity or the resulting social crises caused by the turmoil of the sixties (or both, as in the case of Rabbit).

One feature of the postwar era was the rapid expansion of consumerism as a homogenizing agent. The country's trudge toward a consumer society left footprints from the First World War as Woodrow Wilson laid out a foreign policy that linked consumerism to statesmanship in order to "convert [the world] to the principles of America," principles that Wilson defined as primarily commercial (de Grazia 3). However, the concept of the citizen-consumer, the idea that it was now every citizen's patriotic duty to spend and to purchase goods, *the* defining characteristic of their national identity, gained the brunt of its force during the propaganda campaigns of the Second World War.¹² Although the war ended, the propaganda of patriotic consumerism did not as the United States' government and complicit media championed mass consumption against "the evils of communism" (Cohen 124). For example, the household products

¹² Elizabeth Cohen's term from *A Consumer's Republic*.

sold during the 1950s and 1960s were not always marketed for their essential usefulness, but rather as a patriotic duty to help boost the American economy:

[The editors of] *Life* argued that “a health and decency standard for everyone” required that every American family acquire not only a “pleasant roof over its head” but all kinds of consumer goods to put in it, ranging from a washing machine and a telephone to matching dishes and silverware. As each family refurbished its hearth after a decade and a half of depression and war, the expanded consumer demand would stoke the fires of production, creating new jobs and, in turn, new markets. Mass consumption in postwar America would not be a personal indulgence, but rather a civic responsibility to provide “full employment and improved living standards for the rest of the nation.” (Cohen 113)

Therefore, the relative usefulness of the new postwar products was inconsequential to the seemingly more communal need to help build a robust economy. Indeed, studies reveal that the actual increase of household gadgets on the market did little to lessen the labor of housewives and domestic workers, but only changed the manner in which tasks were done and created more tasks for them to perform.¹³ Furthermore, although the propaganda conveyed a spirit of community—every American doing their part—in reality it also created an increased sense of competition among neighbors that instilled the proverbial “keep up with the Joneses” mentality. More cynically, though, such propaganda plays on that part of America’s psyche rooted in the Protestant ethic. The housewife, for example, was not only patriotic for purchasing such

¹³ See Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*, New York: Basic Books, 1983.

gadgets, but by using them she contributed to and solidified her identity as part of the American community. However, the pressure exerted on Americans to buy these ancillary consumer products often fed into the enormous expansion of economic and political power of corporate interests that took advantage by increasingly encouraging consumers to go heavily into debt in order to finance more and more of the latest and more expensive goods. Indeed, “Americans were told by economists and government leaders that it was acceptable, even patriotic, to be in debt” (McDonald 109).

Consequently, American individualism, particularly in postwar America, was in part being offered as an economic concept, the businessman unfettered by an intrusive government.¹⁴ For example, in regard to patriotic consumerism, the development of the United States into a consumer culture predated the World War II generation, but only in the aftermath of the Second World War did a systematic and programmatic propaganda campaign begin to link inextricably American identity to consumerism.

If to be an American simply means participating in the buying and selling of products, it is an America that Updike’s Rabbit Angstrom and the women of Morrison’s *Paradise* find soulless. Indeed, the first novel of Updike’s tetralogy, *Rabbit, Run* tells the story of twenty-six-year-old Rabbit Angstrom, a former high school basketball star, and his flight from his pregnant wife and two-year-old son. In an aborted flight sparked by his recognition of a fraudulent consumer society, Rabbit deserts his family and embarks on a spiritual quest to find his true self. In the novel, and throughout the tetralogy, Updike reframes American individualism not as an economic construct but as an unfiltered,

¹⁴ HUAC, for example, wanted films to portray in part the independent man as an embodiment of the virtues of capitalism.

private, spiritual relationship with God—the core legacy of Protestantism.¹⁵ The ramifications, for Updike, are significant because forced paradigms of national identity that do not reflect the nation's ideals destroy, or at the very least inhibit, the free individual. As the tetralogy shows, the more Rabbit Angstrom conforms to these paradigms, the less American he becomes. Rather than seeing consumerism linked to Protestant spirituality, Updike frames it as Protestantism's antithesis while Morrison sees it as Protestantism's material identity, or how it has worked in practice in the United States, regardless of its ideal. In *Beloved*, Morrison gives a glimpse of how an Africanist religious influence might have configured Christianity differently if not for the powerful influence of the overarching white narrative. The trilogy dramatizes how slavery and postwar institutional racism influenced blacks to model white society since blacks were denied their American identity legally. Thus, the men of *Paradise* mimic how white Protestantism can function as a patriarchal, economic, consumerist network.

In *Rabbit Angstrom*, the subject of my second chapter, for Rabbit to embody Updike's conception of American identity he must embody the spirit of the core of America's religious heritage, and the striking difference Updike illustrates between Rabbit and the Episcopalian reverend, Jack Eccles, in *Rabbit, Run* epitomizes the theological fissure in the American Protestant tradition, specifically between legalism and antinomianism.¹⁶ As Larzer Ziff illustrates:

¹⁵ Updike's Rabbit tetralogy utilizes the theology of the 20th century Protestant theologian Karl Barth, who wanted to restore Protestantism to its fundamental tenets. (For theological readings on the Rabbit tetralogy see Boswell, Marshall. *The Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion*. Columbia: University of Missouri, 2001 and Bailey, Peter. *Rabbit (Un) Redeemed: The Drama of Belief in John Updike's Fiction*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2006.)

¹⁶ Antinomians hold that under the gospel dispensation of grace, moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation.

[In] the Anglo-American Christian tradition, not to speak of other cultures and other religions, exists a tension between legalism and antinomianism, between the belief that religion, taking its impetus from revelation, through reason achieves forms and laws which are essential to the aiding of weak human nature and to the continuity of divine law upon earth; and the belief that since man's relation to God is super-rational, consisting as it does of the Lord's gift of grace to the individual believer, laws and rituals are dead except insofar as they are directly informed by the Holy Spirit acting through the individual believer. (Ziff 34)

Updike's fascination with "middles" is oft-noted; as he has expressed, in the middle is where "extremes clash, where ambiguity restlessly rules" (Updike, Interview, *NY Times*). Although his use of "middle" is often interpreted as referring to the middle-class, it can be interpreted as having a more abstract meaning—or as a middle in all things. And it is in this middle space of American Protestantism's theological conflict where Rabbit's angst arises as Rabbit embodies the conflict between Protestant legalism and Protestant antinomianism. Stephen Webb notes that Updike has frequently confessed to "antinomian tendencies," and through Rabbit, Updike appears to endorse antinomianism over Eccles's legalism (584). However, Updike sees this tension between the two as not necessarily resolvable but as a necessary part of American identity. In the novel, Updike pits Lutheranism versus Episcopalianism and in doing so he traces American identity's roots to the Reformation and Martin Luther. In accordance with Updike, Sacvan Bercovitch, reaches beyond the Puritans to Luther in locating the origins of Western individualism that culminated into the American sense of self (*Puritan Origins* 11). Updike's sense of

individualism, then, is rooted in the spirit of the Reformation that removed the intermediary between the individual and God. Played out politically, this idea is realized, Updike declares, “in the American political experiment, which I take to be, at bottom, a matter of trusting the citizens to know their own minds and best interests” (Updike, Interview, *NPR*):

“To govern with the consent of the governed”: this spells the ideal. And though the implementation will inevitably be approximate and debatable, and though totalitarianism or technocratic government can obtain some swift successes, in the end, only a democracy can enlist a people’s energies on a sustained and renewable basis. To guarantee the individual maximum freedom within a social frame of minimal laws ensures — if not happiness — its hopeful pursuit. (Updike, Interview, *NPR*)

The remarks indicate that Updike shares with Emerson his optimism about America as an ideal nation. However, Updike’s writing has a yes-but quality as has been often noted, and so the clause “if not cogently” is key to understanding another difference with Emerson. Whereas Emerson articulates a nation predestined by God and where, for Emerson, America “wed the ideals of individualism” and “community,” Updike sees America less pretentiously and as a nation that will always and necessarily possess the tensions that Emerson sees as being resolved in his idea of America (Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* 183). America is the place where the true Protestant-envisioned human drama of God and man can play out unfettered. Rather than some utopia, theocracy, or New Jerusalem, America must be a sinner’s paradise, a vanity fair, a bastion of both puritanism and hedonism, for this is the price of individuality and the

pathway to grace. Although Updike's conceptualization of American identity represents an ideal, he recognizes that in practice the ideal is certain not to be fully realized at all times and in the details of its implementation. For Updike, America is a special place, but special because of its messiness, its fallibility, and the recognition that participatory democracy is inherently anti-utopian, anti-fascist, and must be conducive to the individualist spirit of the American character. That individualist spirit, self-governing and resistant to totalitarianism, keeps America malleable and progressive by resisting the arbitrary enforcement of a strict, limited, and exclusive national identity.

Born at the height of the Great Depression in 1932, Updike was too young to serve in World War II and already college-bound at the start of the Korean conflict. However, the difficulties of these times along with the national euphoria of victory in the Second World War ingrained in Updike not disillusionment, but rather a sense that he belonged to a privileged generation:

My generation, once called Silent, was in a considerable fraction of its white majority, a fortunate one. . . . We acquired in hard times a habit of work and came to adulthood when work paid off; we experienced the patriotic cohesion of World War II without having to fight the war. We were repressed enough to be pleased by the relaxation of the old sexual morality, without suffering much of the surfeit, anomie, and venereal disease of younger generations. We were simple and hopeful enough to launch into idealistic careers and early marriages, and pragmatic enough to adjust, with an American shrug, to the ebb of old certainties. Yet, though spared many of the material deprivations and religious terrors that had

dogged our parents, and awash in a disproportionate share of the world's resources, we continued prey to what Freud call "normal human unhappiness." (Updike, *Early*, xiv)

The "patriotic cohesion" Updike experienced, brought on by World War II, spurred further attempts by the government and mass media to build a national consensus and unite Americans under a common identity. It is not surprising then that Updike, Morrison, and Roth have devoted a significant portion of their work to address the many facets of this identity phenomenon. Updike, Morrison, and Roth, all children of the Depression and the World War II era, have borne witness to and recorded much of American history of the last sixty years. Therefore, the influence of the postwar period features prominently in these works. Updike's tetralogy begins close to postwar America and stretches to the Reagan Era. Indeed, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), the final novel of the tetralogy, connects Reagan to the postwar era—he a mighty Cold War warrior—and Rabbit shares with Reagan the nostalgia for pre-1960s America. In *Rabbit at Rest*, the Reagan Era is the 1940s-1950s redux in terms of the country's military power and strength and in terms of how Reagan framed American identity.

My third chapter expands the discussion of American identity by examining Toni Morrison's unnamed trilogy produced from 1987 to 1998. Connected like Roth's trilogy by themes rather than a consistent cast of characters, Morrison's trilogy covers primarily the lives of African Americans from the 1850s to the mid-1970s. While Updike's series is temporally contiguous, Morrison's trilogy aesthetically presents a fractured and historically complex picture of American identity. Morrison's techniques in each of these novels reflect her resistance to grand narratives that Richard Schur argues point to "the

banner of one signifier, such as singular ‘black’ or ‘African-American’ culture,” and, as I will argue, American identity (32). Morrison’s trilogy illuminates African-Americans’ alienated position within American history and the sheer impracticality of sharing in the predominant myths of American identity without risking cultural destruction. Setting the opening novel, *Beloved*, in the heart of the nineteenth century, Morrison portrays slave life in an era that gave birth to precursory components of American identity, such as Emersonian individualism and expanding free market capitalism. *Beloved* attempts to recover forgotten American history, and it also illuminates American identity in light of black presence and suggests how American identity cannot be understood without coming to terms with this history. *Jazz* traces African American movement into the City as blacks explore individuality on their own terms while remaining constrained by the racism of post-Reconstruction America. Here, Morrison utilizes and explores the constraints of allegory in an effort to dramatize the failure of race as a signifier of American identity. In concluding her trilogy with *Paradise*, Morrison seeks to uncover the failure of the postwar American dream in an all-black town. While not assimilating physically, the people of Ruby have mimicked whites’ version of American identity through their accommodation of exploitative capitalism and didactic myths. Although the novel ends in violence, the novel suggests that by reimagining myth constrictive notions of identity can be overcome.

Although Morrison’s and Roth’s trilogies commence decades after *Rabbit Angstrom* begins, they both focus heavily on the postwar period for its significance in shaping American identity. Morrison’s trilogy reaches back to the nineteenth century, but part of her project was to correct the postwar forgetting of African American history and,

as I will show, to address the failures of the postwar American dream, which, for blacks, was exemplified by financial security and racial equality. For example, Morrison culminates her trilogy by setting the climactic novel *Paradise* (1998) primarily during the postwar and Vietnam eras. Finally, the context of Morrison's trilogy, I will argue, demonstrates that the culture of the Reagan Era threatened the remembrance of blacks' role in American history as well—a replay of the postwar forgetting. Since Morrison's trilogy sets out to uncover black Americans' essential role in American identity (as in *Beloved* [1987]), it laments how male WASPness, the white ruling elite of the United States, overshadowed, subsumed, and disregarded blacks' culture and African heritage. For Morrison, the material identity of white Protestantism, how it actually works in practice, must be vigorously confronted. The town's sexism, racism, and consumerism in fact result from such replication. Morrison, thus, hopes to recover black history and culture in order to reimagine American identity under these terms. In addition, Morrison wants to reconfigure the notion of American individualism. The trilogy posits that individualism has been used as a euphemism for one person's "right" to oppress another and expresses a desire to break from the community. While Rabbit Angstrom's perpetual spiritual crisis has much to do with obtrusive communal and familial ties, in *Jazz* (1991), Morrison's individuals long for community and sense of belonging—the dangers of selfish individualism lurk in the City where the sense of community has been either lost or diminished amid the cityscape. The legacies of slavery and Jim Crow have induced a desire for individual freedom, and like Rabbit, several of Morrison's characters thirst for it, but the desire for society returns, especially to the women in the novel. In *Paradise*, Morrison hints at the ideal relationship between individuals and community: a non-

coercive, unrestrictive, and cooperative relationship. Indeed, in the Convent, the inhabitants come and go freely and are welcomed by Consolata, the Convent's matriarch, whereas in the patriarchal Ruby, the men attempt to control who belongs and who does not, largely in terms of racial and economic interests.

Morrison's concern with destruction by assimilation is shared by Philip Roth, whose trilogy is the subject of my fourth chapter. Like Morrison's series, Roth's American trilogy is connected by themes rather than characters other than its narrator Nathan Zuckerman. Roth's trilogy, similar to the Rabbit tetralogy, spans from circa 1945 to the Clinton era. Roth's final two novels of the trilogy, *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), show the continuation of 1950s era nationalism and persecution into the 1990s. As portrayed in Roth's trilogy, the end of World War II marks the crucial point in Jewish-American history. While liberal theorists hoped establishing tenets of American identity would be inclusive and allow for a multicultural and multi-ethnic society, Roth portrays postwar American identity as subsuming and potentially destructive of ethnic identity. Consequently, Jews and African Americans, Roth shows, at times game the system in an attempt to thrive in postwar American society. However, their participation in and acceptance involves a corrupt bargain in which they must sacrifice some of their communities' values and even surrender their ethnic and racial identity, as Coleman Silk does in *The Human Stain*. In *American Pastoral*, Roth demythologizes the idea of an American utopia. As Mark Maslan argues, the novel shows that the rejection of certain identities is "merely the precondition for embodying a national one" (381). But if the national identity is one that respects the ideal, this does not force conformity upon the individual, but it forces the nation to respect its diversity. The

sequel, *I Married a Communist*, examines the consequences of abandoning Jewish identity. The young, naïve Nathan Zuckerman falls prey to propaganda of the postwar period, ignoring his Jewish father's and Jewish mentor's counsel.

American Pastoral (1997) resembles aspects of the Rabbit tetralogy, especially *Rabbit Redux* (1971), in revisiting the Vietnam War era. In this opening to his trilogy, Roth seeks to destroy the myths of both WASP and Jewish Americans who believed that the postwar era signified a paradisiacal America. In the series' next installment, *I Married a Communist* (1998), Roth recreates the era of HUAC and McCarthyism, revealing their anti-Semitic and generally intolerant overtones. At first mesmerized by the postwar atmosphere, the young Nathan Zuckerman (Roth's primary narrator throughout the trilogy), disavows his Jewish identity in favor of a seemingly new, pure postwar American identity that is disconnected from the past. However, Zuckerman's father and mentor both convey the importance of maintaining and recognizing the Jewishness within the American character. Although postwar propaganda attempted to unite disparate ethnic and racial groups through its presentation of "American" ideals, the novel shows that "American" was a euphemism for WASPness. Thus, the attempt to homogenize American culture under WASP paradigms was a threat to Jewishness and, even worse, resembled Nazism. In concluding his trilogy with *The Human Stain* (2000), Roth reveals the continuation of the McCarthy era-style persecution, which in itself hearkened back to Puritan America, through the novel's representation of the ordeals of both President Clinton and the novel's protagonist Coleman Silk.

While Morrison's and Roth's trilogies expand the representation of American identity outside of Updike's parameters, each series offer critiques of forced and

contrived national narratives that attempt to define how Americans imagine themselves and their nation. Therefore, these series of novels do not just reflect the postwar period, but they also use the postwar era as a way to understand the nation since and thereby offer a complex panorama of American society in the second half of the twentieth century. Most significant is the authors' extensive investigation into the very question of American identity, an elusive yet politically consequential concept that frames how Americans understand each other and define their nation. Though their styles, approaches, and perspectives remain distinct from each other, they share extraordinary talents of social, cultural, and political perception. By grouping these authors together, we can see their dialogical relationship, as they illustrate a diverse conception of American identity consistent with the ideals of democracy and equality.

In the varying combinations, these three authors have been at different times studied in pairs. George Searles's 1985 *The Fiction of Philip Roth and John Updike* discusses these authors as the writers to whom "future generations of literary critics and social demographers will most profitably return when seeking fictions from which to derive a felt sense of life in the troubled second half of the twentieth century" (7). In his article "Dream or Nightmare? Roth, Morrison, and America," Richard Schur points out that Roth's and Morrison's trilogies examine the "consequences [that] follow from the distinction between the ethnic/racial/religious identifier and the imagined community of America" (20). In his article "Under the Skin of John Updike: *Self-Consciousness* and the Racial Unconscious," Jay Prosser calls for more extensive studies of Updike alongside Toni Morrison. Finally, the novels that compose these series reveal their cultural and artistic significance in American literature. The Rabbit tetralogy has garnered two

Pulitzer Prizes and a National Book Award; Toni Morrison's *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize and was, arguably, largely responsible for her Nobel Prize in 1993; Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize.

The completion of Updike's tetralogy predates most of Morrison's trilogy and all of Roth's, so Morrison's and Roth's works respond more to the Rabbit novels than vice versa. Nevertheless, the novels are strikingly intertextual: a female Rabbit Angstrom pops up in Morrison's *Paradise*, Updike's Jewish golfers in *Rabbit at Rest* lend a critical eye to American propaganda which Rabbit is all too eager to believe, Swede Levov is in many ways Rabbit's Jewish counterpart, and both Roth and Morrison explicitly examine a paradise lost in postwar America. In terms of identity, these authors have been studied for what their texts reveal about gender, racial, ethnic, and religious identities. However, my dissertation seeks to unite their series of novels as explicitly dedicated to revealing American identity not as a singular, didactic concept but a collaborative—and, thus—democratic idea.

CHAPTER II

JOHN UPDIKE'S RABBIT TETRALOGY:

RABBIT AND AMERICA'S SHARED IDENTITY CRISIS

A war was going on, and political differences, however shrill, were submerged in our common identity as young Americans doing our bit to defeat Hitler and Mussolini and Hirohito.

-John Updike (*Self-Consciousness* 123)

Rabbit Angstrom in Context

The career of John Updike began similarly to those of his peers as the then-nascent author gained early recognition for his vignettes of 1950s America in various stories appearing in *The New Yorker*, sixteen of which were collected and published in *The Same Door* (1959). In 1960, Updike published his second novel *Rabbit, Run*, initiating what would become over the next thirty years his signature work, the Rabbit tetralogy, now collectively referred to as *Rabbit Angstrom*. *Rabbit Angstrom* covers some thirty years of American history, embodying the national spirit of the four decades (1950s-1980s) spanning most of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's adult life and ending in 1989 with *Rabbit at Rest*. Despite the series' preoccupation with America in the late twentieth century, Updike criticism, especially in regard to the Rabbit novels, has centered on his aesthetic achievements, use of mythology, and religious philosophy. As D. Quentin Miller points out, critics tend to treat the novels of *Rabbit Angstrom* separately, "as if there are no unifying themes connecting them" (6). Although Marshall Boswell's *The Rabbit Tetralogy: Mastered Irony in Motion* (2001) and Peter J. Bailey's *Rabbit (Un) Redeemed* (2006) are among the first major works and remain among the few to treat the series as a whole, Boswell and Bailey follow in the path of critics such as Donald Greiner by characterizing Rabbit's quest as a rendering of Updike's religious

faith and theology. Noting Updike's reading of Søren Kierkegaard in the years just before the publication of *Rabbit, Run*, Boswell discusses the novel (and the entire tetralogy) in terms of Rabbit's faith in his inner life with a "Kierkegaardian ethical center" (9).

Although theological readings of the novels of *Rabbit Angstrom* offer insight into Updike's intricate understanding of the interplay among Christian philosophy, faith, and art, they tend to do so without juxtaposing the tetralogy's relationship to American identity portrayed in *Rabbit, Run*, and which he continued to explore throughout the tetralogy. Indeed, in the opening novel, Updike frames Rabbit's rejection of 1950s consumerism and conformity politically as much as spiritually, and together the novels exemplify Updike's portrait of Rabbit and America's shared identity crisis.

As Updike once declared, Rabbit's being "has this political dimension" (Updike, "Why Rabbit Had to Go," 7). My dissertation, thus, builds on such critical works on Updike as Dilvo Ristoff's *Updike's America: The Presence of American History in John Updike's Rabbit Trilogy* (1983) and *John Updike's Rabbit at Rest: Appropriating History* (1998), Miller's *John Updike and the Cold War* (2001), and Jay Prosser's "Updike, Race, and the Postcolonial Project" (2006). These works lay a foundation for studying the tetralogy's political overtones that have been often overlooked in Updike criticism.

Although these works serve as important touchstones for steering criticism toward recognizing Updike's interest in documenting American history and the mindset of his times, they do not fully investigate the extent to which Updike tries to unravel American identity. In the 1983 work, for example, Ristoff calls our attention only to the usage of history in his treatment of the then-trilogy. Additionally, Miller's and Prosser's works

examine an array of Updike's fiction rather than novels that are obviously tied together, such as *Rabbit Angstrom*.

My work offers a concentrated treatment of *Rabbit Angstrom* not only as a document of thirty years of American history, but more specifically as a “mega-novel” that explores the nature of American identity.¹⁷ Although Updike's other works may portray characters shaped by the historical context of the given time period, Updike most fully explores the nature of American identity through *Rabbit Angstrom*. Updike clarifies the uniqueness of the *Rabbit* novels:

Insofar as a writer can take an external view of his own work, my impression is that the character of Harry ‘Rabbit’ Angstrom was for me a way in—a ticket to the America all around me. . . . Each [novel] was composed at the end of the decade and published at the beginning of the next one; they became a kind of running report on the state of my hero and *his* nation [emphasis mine], and their ideal reader became a fellow-American who had read and remembered the previous novels of *Rabbit Angstrom*. (Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom*, vii)

Rabbit Angstrom is for Updike and his readers a way to understand how each decade has affected *Rabbit* and their country alike. Therefore, *Rabbit* personifies the condition of his country, and his problems reflect the nation's. The two intertwined, as evidenced by *Rabbit's* dressing up as Uncle Sam at a Fourth of July parade in *Rabbit at Rest*, *Rabbit*

¹⁷ Updike refers to the tetralogy as a mega-novel in his foreword to the Everyman edition of *Rabbit Angstrom*.

and America share the identity crisis brought on by the social and political changes they endure.¹⁸

The Rabbit novels seek to account for this identity crisis, especially among the so-called Silent Majority who enjoyed privileges and material comforts not yet experienced in the nation's history. The series' initial text *Rabbit, Run* (1960) presents this national identity crisis more subtly than do the other novels, having mystical and spiritual overtones that are largely balanced by more direct political and cultural references in the more earthy and later installments. Nevertheless, the central question Updike poses in *Rabbit, Run* is how can the quintessential American, or at least the one who epitomizes the traditional, propagandized, and hegemonic icon of American identity, (white, male, and Protestant) be unhappy in America at the height of its power? The soul-searching novel finds Rabbit Angstrom at a loss as he bounces among women, religions, jobs, and homes. Despite its material excess and formidable military might, the country teeters on extinction as it plays a nuclear version of chicken against the Soviet Union. For Rabbit, though, these larger political problems filter down to his life through coerced conformity and soulless consumerism. For Updike, Rabbit, at least in the opening novel, has remained (or desires to remain) more purely American in spirit than his country, resisting institutions and newfangled postwar culture that confine his individuality through coerced religious and cultural conformity.

In *Rabbit Redux* (1971) Rabbit's problems are more tangible than they are in *Rabbit, Run*: a cheating wife, building tension between father and son, a deteriorating town, and a nation bogged-down in a war it will not soon win. Updike's reaction to the

¹⁸ Updike models this scene after his father, who had played Uncle Sam in a victory parade after World War II.

sixties was bewilderment at the privileged classes who seemed to revel in their nation's foreign and domestic cataclysms:¹⁹

One source of my grievance against the peace movement was that I hadn't voted for any of its figures—not for Abbie Hoffman or Father Daniel Berrigan. . . . The protest, from my perspective, was in large part a snobbish dismissal by the Eastern establishment; Cambridge professors and Manhattan lawyers and their guitar-strumming children thought they could run the country and the world better than this lugubrious bohunk from Texas [Updike voted for Lyndon Johnson]. These privileged members of a privileged nation believed that their enviable position could be maintained without anything visibly ugly happening in the world. They were full of aesthetic disdain for their own defenders, the business-suited hirelings drearily pondering geopolitics and its bloody necessities down in Washington. (Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 124-125)

Yet Updike's support for the Vietnam War was tepid at best, and he even expressed displeasure that the *New York Times* had classified his position as "unequivocally for" the war: "How could anyone not be at least equivocal about an action so costly, so cruel in its details, so indecisive in its results?" (Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 117). Indeed, Updike's support for American involvement was highly conditional, and he criticized the American government's handling of the war: "These butterfingers fat cats in their three-hundred-dollar suits had dropped us all into a mess of blood and shame and embarrassment" (*Self-Consciousness* 134). He also criticized "doves" whom he believed were ignoring the carnage and persecution the South Vietnamese were facing at the hands of communists

¹⁹ Philip Roth later echoes these sentiments.

and would face in the event of a unilateral American withdrawal: “I visualized tortured and executed [villagers] by the Viet Cong [that wanted] to show us [*sic*] peasants that the only possible social order was theirs” (*Self-Consciousness* 133). In his response to a questionnaire about Vietnam, Updike wrote: “I do not believe that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Cong have a moral edge over us. . . . It is absurd to suggest that a village in the grip of guerillas has freely chosen. . . . If their will is Communism, we should pick up our chips and leave. Until such a will is expressed [through elections], I do not see how we can abdicate our position in South Vietnam” (*Self-Consciousness* 117). Admittedly exasperated by his country’s divisiveness over the war, Updike left for England in 1969 where he began writing *Rabbit Redux* (1971). The lively sequel to *Rabbit, Run* displays Rabbit’s notion of American identity unhinged, under fire, and yet at the same time refreshingly undergoing revision thanks to Skeeter, a black Vietnam vet turned militant, who awakens Rabbit to an alternate version of their country’s history, debunking for him many of his precious American myths.

Redux can mean to restore, and the end of the novel suggests that Rabbit’s marriage and his country will be restored. After the mayhem of *Redux* comes the “happiest novel of the four,” *Rabbit is Rich* (1981), where we find that both Rabbit’s marriage and his country have apparently healed in the ten years since the end of *Redux* (Updike, *Rabbit Angstom*, xv). But the novel’s title and its author’s characterization belie an underlying cynicism while its hero and country are both “[r]unning out of gas” (*Rabbit is Rich* 1). Both the country’s and Rabbit’s illusory prosperity stem from a touch of luck and borrowed resources. Rabbit’s reward for reconciling with Janice is to be handed a Toyota dealership from the father-in-law who took Rabbit on as a salesman, and

“when the time was ripe had the kindness to die” (*Rich* 2). The novel is set in 1979, and the US runs on the mercy of Big Oil and Japan’s dependable automobiles; broken-down American cars are what Rabbit and other dealerships unload to unsuspecting poorer and younger customers. As Stacey Olster observes, “the America Harry Angstrom is meant to mirror is in steady decline” (46). President Carter’s symbolic gesture of pardoning draft evaders epitomizes the feeble attempt to close the chapter on the Vietnam-era strife and reconcile the country’s divisions. Rabbit sympathizes with Carter but sees him as weak, especially in the wake of the Iran hostage crisis. On the surface, the turmoil of the sixties and of Rabbit’s marriage have seemed to pass, but just as the 70s are known as the Tom Wolfe-coined “Me” decade, Rabbit, too, turns more selfish and disconnects from his son whom he increasingly belittles. Rabbit lusts after Webb Murkett’s nubile wife and begins an affair with Thelma Harrison the wife of his longtime rival from high school.²⁰ Images of Rabbit as a miser carrying around and obsessing over his gold coins persist throughout the text. In the world of *Rabbit is Rich* the sixties were just an isolated tremor, America repositioning itself rather than experiencing any political or economic revolution. As Rabbit’s employee Charlie Stavros tells him, “[t]he little man is acting like the oil companies now. I’ll get mine, and screw you” (5).

In *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), Rabbit’s thirty-two-year-old son Nelson represents what Rabbit’s America has bequeathed to the next generation. Like Nelson, 1989 America is coked out, heavily in debt, and through shifty economics is bilking people out of money. For Rabbit, though, the Reagan era is like “anesthetic” while Reagan himself “floated above the facts” while “running up the national debt” but at least, in Rabbit’s mind, he

²⁰ We learn retrospectively in *Rabbit at Rest* that Rabbit and Thelma’s affair commences after the spouse-swapping episode in *Rich*.

was tough on communists, a “dream man” under whom “the world became a better place” (54-55). While in *Rich* Rabbit identifies with the greed and selfishness that has consumed his country, in *Rest* he prefers the “goofy” optimism of Reagan and the commercial-like feel of his and Bush’s presidencies, a kind of fraud that he once despised (54). Although he senses the financial voodoo of Reaganomics, Rabbit appreciates Reagan’s Cold War saber-rattling as a sign of America’s return to greatness and leans on the trope of strength as a defining element of American identity. Rabbit asks at one point, “If there’s no Cold War, what’s the point of being an American?” (402). In associating American-ness with the Cold War, Rabbit turns nostalgically to the past, believing retrospectively that the Cold War had brought out the best in the country and exemplified a time when America and he were at their peak. In his and his country’s declining health, Rabbit clings to an imaginary version of both himself and his nation. Rabbit and America are always better in retrospect.

Rabbit, Run and America’s Protestant Legacies

Written partly in response to Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), Updike’s second novel and the first installment of the Rabbit tetralogy took on an instantly iconic work that had repackaged familiar tropes of American identity in 1950s hipster garb.²¹ As Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes, road narratives have ideological implications, and *On the Road* reinforces certain American myths endemic to the nature of the nation’s identity (*The Dialogic Imagination* 244). *On the Road*, for example, follows in the tradition of American novels having characters “light out for the territory,” searching for an Edenic

²¹ Updike states “Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* came out in 1957 and, without reading it, I resented its apparent instruction to cut loose; *Rabbit, Run* was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road – the people left behind get hurt” (Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom*, x). At some point before commencing *Run*, Updike had at least read portions of Kerouac’s novel, for he spoofed it in the pages of the *New Yorker* in a story titled “On the Sidewalk.”

paradise.²² In his foreword to *Rabbit Angstrom*, Updike writes that with *Rabbit, Run* he wanted to break free from this trope. The characters of Melville and Twain, Updike observes, exist on the fringes of American society and their experiences take place spatially outside of it or on its edge. Although Rabbit is similar in spirit to such freedom seekers, Updike's realism posits him in the middle of everyday American life.

Additionally, *Rabbit, Run* reacts to Kerouac's and other Beat Writers' celebration of the "perpetual NOW" and the mysterious "IT" (Weinreich 77). Indeed, the perpetual NOW becomes a source of irony for Updike as he writes in the present tense about a young man who clings to his storied past as a high school basketball star, suggesting that Kerouac's version of American identity rests in adolescent notions of freedom that, for Updike, inevitably involve the abdication of social responsibility. But Updike refuses to conclude that Rabbit Angstrom should simply grow up and go back to his alcoholic, immature wife. Instead, as much as a carefree life on the road rankled Updike, so did the trappings of 1950s American domesticity, which he was quick to link to America's expanding culture of consumerism. Had Updike read Kerouac's novel (see footnote 22) he might have found Sal Paradise's settling into domesticity equally problematic. Rabbit possesses what Sal seeks, but Rabbit begins to see postwar American domesticity as built upon a fraud of consumerism and conformity. Consequently, as a MagiPeel salesman who markets the product to housewives, Rabbit perceives his marriage and career as an extension of that fraud.

Reflecting on his writing, Updike observes, "My novels are all about the search for useful work. So many people these days have to sell things they don't believe in and

²² Huckleberry Finn's famous declaration, which has become an iconic assertion of American individualism and freedom.

have jobs that defy describing” (qtd. in Greiner 51). Updike traces his sense of work ethic through his deeply parochial upbringing. Speaking of his Pennsylvania roots, Updike recalls that

The cautious spirit of Ben Franklin’s maxims still lived in the air. A penny saved is a penny earned; willful waste is woeful want; a fool and his money are soon parted; my grandfather quoted these often, as inherited wisdom passed on. My father’s bitter economic experience supplied some darker maxims. Another day, another dollar. Dog eat dog. You don’t get something for nothing. I had been reared in the static, defensive world of the Depression, to which the World War added a coloring embattlement and patriotic pride. . . . I was an American Protestant. (Updike, *Self Consciousness* 135)

As an “*American* [emphasis mine] Protestant,” Updike declares, he was “the beneficiary of a number of revolts, Luther’s, which dumped the Pope; Cromwell’s, which dumped the monarchy; and Sam Adams’s, which dumped the British” (135). Updike alludes to Protestantism as a fundamental part of his American-ness and says that his work ethic emanates from that combination. As Gail McDonald notes, in Protestantism “one’s work becomes itself a sign of God’s blessing” (67). Work and its products signify spirituality, but Updike shows that an American society immersed in consumerism loses spiritual value as material possessions become evidence of one’s American identity. George Searles argues that Updike takes part in “a long tradition of Protestant self-criticism” that “does not attack Christianity itself, but the distortion and violation of its tenets” (20). Stephen Webb also points to Updike as an important theological writer whose fiction

documents “the eclipse of mainline Protestantism as a force for social change and a carrier of cultural standards” (588). However, Searles and other Updike critics who focus on Updike’s critique of Protestantism do so primarily as an analysis of Updike’s critique of religion without regard to how the author links Protestantism and national identity. For if Rabbit’s situation exemplifies the American predicament, then, for Updike, the evaporation of substantive Protestant values leads to a loss of Rabbit’s and America’s core identities. Thus, Updike explores American identities through the lens of its religious legacies.

According to Gail McDonald, Max Weber demonstrates that “the acquisition of possessions for their own sake, beyond a reasonable level of comfort was not the goal” of the Protestant ethic (68), while Gregory Jay also notes that consumer identity “considers cultural practices strictly as commodities” (115). In *Rabbit, Run*, Updike carefully distinguishes consumerism from the Protestant work ethic. As a MagiPeel Peeler salesman, Rabbit appears to sell a useful product rather than a product of indulgence. The name of the product, however, ironically suggests that its usefulness is illusory; the only “magic” of the peeler is the “fraud,” Rabbit thinks, that he helps to perpetuate by selling a product whose functions remain opaque (*Run* 10). Additionally, Rabbit recognizes that the true purpose of selling such fraudulent products is to support the “base of our economy” (11).

Updike illustrates the subtlety of corporate America’s appropriation of the Protestant ethic in the opening pages of the novel when Rabbit comes home and begins to watch the Mickey Mouse Club on television. Rabbit “expects to learn something helpful from [Jimmie the Mouseketeer] in his own line of work, which is demonstrating a kitchen

gadget in five-and-dime stores around Brewer” (*Rabbit, Run* 10). Playing his “Mouseguitar,” Jimmie sings “Proverbs, proverbs, they’re so true . . . proverbs tell us what to do; proverbs help us all to *bee*—better—Mouse-ke-teers” (10). Although Jimmie’s proverb begins with the Socratic advice “Know Thyself,” Jimmie incorrectly defines this dictum as “be what you are” and then piously tells the audience that “God wants some of us to become scientists, some of us to become artists, some of us to become firemen and doctors and trapeze artists” (10). The narrator tells us that Rabbit and Janice are Christians and that “God’s name makes them feel guilty.” Explaining that “We must *work*,” Jimmie concludes his sermon by pinching his mouth and winking (10). Jimmie the Mouseketeer has replaced the minister in the American pulpit, and instead of working to enhance their relationship with God, Updike intimates, Americans work to become good consumers as part of the congregation of Walt Disney. Rabbit, though, picks up on Jimmie’s wink and tries to imitate him. Feeling akin to Jimmie—“he respects him”—Rabbit appreciates that with his wink Jimmie acknowledges that they are both part of the same sham: Jimmie of Walt Disney and Rabbit of the MagiPeel Peeler Company (10). “We’re all in it together,” Rabbit thinks, “Fraud makes the world go round” (10). Additionally, Jimmie’s list of roles that God wants us to fulfill are not just social roles, but also are specific occupations that serve the community. Jimmie emphasizes work as a desire of God, but his ironic wink implies that in reality Jimmie uses God’s name as a tool of propaganda and as a mask for the desires of the consumer state. Jimmie’s propaganda further demonstrates the subtlety of television’s role in playing to deeply rooted paradigms of American identity and refashioning them for the consumer age. As a popular character on a national television program, Jimmie invokes God, presuming that

America is a religious nation. Certainly, the program plays to its demographic for commercial purposes, but by so casually working God into the script, the program also reinforces the idea that God is inextricable from American society in contrast to the godlessness of the nation's Cold War enemies. Although Cold War propaganda was fashioned to promote an inclusive brand of American identity, it often resulted in subtle repackaging of traditional American stereotypes. For example, although Jimmie does not announce his God's denomination, the subtext points to his Protestant Christian incarnation as evidenced by Jimmie's emphasis on God's insistence that everyone must work. Additionally, because of communism's association with atheism, the presentation of the United States as a God-believing nation remained important to maintaining a central core of the nation's identity despite increasing undercurrents of secularity. Updike was concerned with American religious shallowness in the postwar period,²³ and *Rabbit, Run* echoes sentiments expressed in Will Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1955) in which Herberg argues that the eponymous brands of religion in the US "were but varietal expressions of a more substantial and fundamental reality, namely, the American Way of Life," and "Herberg saw them as at root expressing a thinly disguised American patriotism or even boosterism" (J. Wilson 57). Indeed, in *Rabbit, Run* tenets and language of American Protestantism are slyly appropriated by commercial interests to induce conformity, groupthink, and surrender of idiosyncratic identity, all necessary for rampant consumerism.

From Jimmie's "lesson," Marshall Boswell concludes that Rabbit "learns that his social identity as a MagiPeel demonstrator is a mask that serves to conceal his inward, existential identity," but that in recognizing this inauthenticity, Rabbit becomes aware of

²³ Hence his interest in Karl Barth.

his “authentic self” (33). Abigail Cheever argues that the label of being a fraud and the epithet “phony” were appellations that became “omnipresent during the postwar period” as did concerns that “[t]oo close a symbiosis between the individual and the various social contexts with which he or she negotiated” existed (2). In addition to phoniness, Cheever continues, postwar society was also concerned with the authenticity of the self: “Authenticity in the postwar period is imagined as that which separates the individual from the social world, as what might be uniquely one’s own than a consequence of social influence,” meaning that culture and society masked the “true” individual beneath (3). Indeed, a flood of sociological and psychological studies poured into the marketplace to “diagnose a specific postwar malaise” representing “a modern cultural moment” that had become obsessed with “struggle for mastery between the individual and her conditions, and one that the individual is inevitably losing” (Cheever 6-7). Although Rabbit does not use phony (a term popularized famously by J.D. Salinger through Rabbit’s literary contemporary Holden Caulfield) while watching the Mickey Mouse Club, Rabbit senses that he has become a fraud like Jimmie, “a grown man who wears circular big ears” (10).²⁴ Indeed, before Rabbit comes home to Janice, he watches (and later interrupts) some kids playing basketball and admires the fact that the boys are “doing this for themselves, not a show for some adult in a double-breasted cocoa suit” (1). The boys are authentic because they are not putting on a performance like Rabbit and Jimmie who are dressed in their costumes and playing to their audience in order to sell a product. Rabbit’s identity crisis arises because he is torn between the practical function of his phony—i.e., socially influenced—identity and his authentic core that society forces him to cover up with his

²⁴ David Boroff calls Rabbit “an older but less articulate Holden Caulfield” (qtd. in Greiner, *John Updike’s Novels*, 51).

business suit. For example, after leaving Janice, Rabbit drives out of town and spots an Amish couple and thinks “of the good life these people lead, of the way they keep clear of all this phony business, this twentieth-century vitamin racket” (27). Later, he thinks of his father-in-law, Fred Springer—a car salesman, as an “old phony” who adopts his Episcopalian faith as a means for social climbing (87).

Updike reinforces his concern for the commodification of faith in a scene that foreshadows the death of Rabbit’s baby daughter and equates Reverend Eccles’s solutions with shallow Christian legalism.²⁵ When Reverend Eccles phones Rabbit to tell him that Janice is having the baby, Rabbit leaves his lover, Ruth, to be with his wife when she gives birth. After the baby, Becky, is born, Rabbit joins Janice in her hospital room. During his second visit, Rabbit and Janice watch a game show during which elderly women tell about their tragedies and earn money “according to how much applause there is;” however, “by the time the M.C. gets done delivering the commercials and kidding them about their grandchildren and their girlish hairdos there isn’t much room for tragedy left” (*Run* 186). The show “makes for a kind of peace” as Rabbit and Janice hold hands, their marriage on the verge of what turns out to be a brief reconciliation (186). For the second time, television shows up at a crucial point in the novel. The hospital television scene marks Rabbit’s return to the marriage, whereas watching *The Mickey Mouse Club* had marked his desertion. The women’s trivializing their lives for money is another example of the decline of spirituality, another perpetuation of the fraud, and signifies that Rabbit’s return to Janice is also insincere. He has returned to Janice, not out of love, but out of guilt and obligation. He feels that his

²⁵ In Christianity, legalism is defined as privileging adherence to church law over faith. Additionally, legalism can also mean that adherence to law will earn God’s favor.

desertion and adultery would lead to either Janice's or Becky's death, meted out by divine justice. He also tells Ruth that he is returning to Janice only until the baby is born. But instead, Rabbit soon forgets about Ruth. His mother asks, "And what's going to happen to this poor girl you lived with in Brewer?" (195). Rabbit nonchalantly replies, "Her? Oh, she can take care of herself. She didn't expect anything," though he immediately "tastes the lie in it" (195). Back with Janice, Rabbit begins to settle into his old life, mends his relationship with his in-laws and, at the suggestion of Eccles, attends church. Having accepted a job from his father-in-law, Rabbit once again dons his mask, dresses in "his new pale-gray suit to sell cars in," and thinks:

the job at the lot is easy enough, if it isn't any work for you to bend the truth. You see the clunkers come in with 80,000 miles on them and the pistons so loose the oil just pours through and they get a washing and the speedometer tweaked back and you hear yourself saying this represents a real bargain. He'll ask for forgiveness. (201)

Though he returns to church, Rabbit appreciates only its superficialities and its aesthetic appearance: he in his suit and loving "the ones dressed for church" while hating "all the people on the street in dirty everyday clothes, advertising their belief that the world arches over a pit, that death is final, that the wandering thread of his feeling leads nowhere" (201). Gone is Rabbit the mystic for the time being while he adopts the superficial religious views permeating his social circle: Act sinfully, God punishes, repent and God rewards, or in other words, immediate and obvious revelation of God's will directly correlates to Rabbit's actions. Having rejoined Janice, Rabbit "considers himself happy, lucky, blessed, forgiven, and wants to give thanks" (201). The

shallowness of Rabbit's "rebirth" reveals itself as Rabbit kneels to pray, but his eye wanders to Eccles's attractive wife. After church, Rabbit soon mistakes Eccles's wife's mundane pleasantness as a sexual overture and, to her shock, tells her that though she's "a doll," he's "got this wife now" (208). Having "rejected" Eccles's wife, he returns home "jazzed up" and ready to have sex with Janice, who is exhausted, sore, and stitched-up from childbirth (209). Feeling that she owes him for his good deed—i.e., returning home without having asked her for anything—Rabbit believes he should be rewarded sexually despite his wife's condition. Janice, though, refuses him, and Rabbit storms out, leaving her for a second time. Upset and drunk, Janice accidentally drowns Becky in the bathtub. The narrative slyly suggests that God does indeed punish Rabbit by letting Becky drown: "He [Rabbit] rolls back his sleeve and reaches down and pulls the plug; the water swings and the drain gasps. He watches the line of water slide slowly and evenly down the wall of the tub, and then with a crazed vertical cry the last of it sucked away. He thinks how easy it was, yet in all His strength God did nothing. Just that little rubber stopper to lift" (237). God's unwillingness to intervene seems to suggest a moralizing tone. But such a reading trivializes Rabbit's tragedy, reducing human fate to a Pavlovian reward-and-punishment relationship with God and, in effect, making God akin to the M.C. on TV, a game show host who doles out winnings to those who suffer without cause or who do good deeds and renders wrath upon evil doers.

The novel's trap for the reader, so to speak, lies in the apparent options that it lays out. If the reader believes that God punishes Rabbit for leaving Janice, then the reader must also accept Rabbit's fraudulence, conformity, social climbing, superficial religiosity, and sleazy salesmanship as virtues to be rewarded. More broadly, the novel

also criticizes a prevailing cultural view that America's postwar prosperity was God's reward for religiosity and protection of individual freedom. Such a view of events in the "myth-history of the nation" make America's "God-given role to lead the world" and its postwar abundance "seem preordained" (Sharp 166). As Jay notes, the "[h]istories of the United States regularly narrate American selfhood in terms of European tyranny versus American freedom," and in the cases of World War II and the Cold War, Germany and the USSR and its Eastern bloc satellites were the latest reincarnations of such tyranny (115). In indicting consumer America as soulless, Updike challenges the mythos that portrays America as reaping the benefits of God's blessings. Such a transparent God, whose will humans easily discern from fortune and misfortune, feast and famine, is a fraudulent God who does not derive from America's Protestant roots. Marshall Boswell relates the following: "Having caught wind that Updike is a self-proclaimed Christian, priests and other fellow believers have gone to his work expecting confirmation of their positivistic, God-ordered moral vision, only to encounter a dialectical anti-theology that borders on existential atheism" (67). Updike rejects such an orderly moral world where God so clearly punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous, a view that Reverend Eccles's legalism accommodates.

Thus, one of the key figures in the novel is Reverend Jack Eccles, the Springer's Episcopalian minister. Boswell characterizes the contrast that Updike draws between Rabbit and Eccles:

Eccles is a man without faith, a believer in human solutions and conventional ethics. His name not only evokes Ecclesiasticus, the author of the eponymously titled Old Testament book of stoic, earthbound

wisdom, but also hints at Updike's ironic strategy: Rabbit's outwardly animalistic and sensuous demeanor conceals an intensely spiritual man, while the minister's ecclesiastical surface conceals an almost pagan unbeliever. Whereas Rabbit is the Knight of Faith, Eccles is a pastoral shepherd. (Boswell 58)

More succinctly, though, Updike draws a contrast between the theologies of two denominations: Episcopalianism and Lutheranism. While Rabbit is a spiritual man of faith, Eccles is an earthly man of actions, and for Updike in this contrast lies a crucial aspect of America's identity crisis. For Rabbit to embody the true American spirit, he must embody the spirit of the core of America's religious heritage, and the striking difference Updike illustrates between the two characters epitomizes the theological fissure in the American Protestant tradition, specifically between legalism and antinomianism.²⁶

The novel's criticism of Eccles's Episcopalianism echoes a tradition of Protestant criticism of Anglicanism and Catholicism: that they are more cosmetic than spiritual.²⁷ Again, Rabbit thinks of his father-in-law's Episcopalianism as a cover for his phoniness, and the narrative points out that the Springers rarely attend church. Additionally, the

²⁶ Antinomians hold that under the gospel dispensation of grace, moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation.

²⁷ To his children, Eccles reads the poems of Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton, turn of the century (19th-20th) poets known for their Catholic Orthodoxy. Belloc advocated for a sociopolitical system modeled on the early Christian Church as an answer to the problems wrought by capitalism. Eccles tells Rabbit that his father, a "very orthodox, almost Anglo-Catholic" clergyman, also read Belloc and Chesterton. The note here is intended to reflect Eccles's social activist theology. Episcopalianism is the American form of Anglicanism. Additionally, factions within the Episcopalian Church maintained that they were part of the Catholic tradition and were moving toward a sacramental approach in contrast to other Protestant denominations (Hudson 155). In *Rabbit is Rich*, Janice's mother says, "Around here [Pennsylvania] Episcopalians are thought the next thing to Catholics anyway" (178). See Addison, James. *The Episcopal Church in the United States*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951 (53).

Springers mainly enlist Eccles in order to quell the gossip about Rabbit and Janice's marriage. Attending Eccles's church, Rabbit feels uncomfortable:

The affected voice, nasal-pious, in which he intones prayers affects Rabbit disagreeably; there is something disagreeable about the whole Episcopal service, with its strenuous ups and downs, its canned petitions, its cursory little chants. He has trouble with the kneeling pad; the small of his back aches; he hooks his elbows over the back of the pew in front of him to keep from falling backward. He misses the familiar Lutheran liturgy, scratched into his heart like a weathered inscription. In this service he blunders absurdly, balked by what seem willful dislocations of worship. He feels too much is made of collecting the money. He scarcely listens to the sermon at all. (*Run* 202)

Discussing his Lutheran sensibility during the 1960s, Updike states: "Faith alone, faith without any false support of works, justified the Lutheran believer and distinguished him from the Catholic and Calvinist believer. In all varieties of Christian faith resides a certain contempt for the world and for attempts to locate salvation and perfection here" (*Self-Consciousness* 136). Because of its reliance on faith alone as the means for receiving God's grace, Lutheranism shares with Updike "antinomian tendencies" (Webb 584). In a letter to a friend, Martin Luther writes, "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ more strongly, who triumphed over sin, death, and the world; as long as we live here, we must sin;" however, Luther rejected the idea that adherence to his doctrine of faith gives license to sin freely (Luther, Letter). In rejecting certain sects of antinomians whom he claimed misunderstood his teachings, Luther did so on the

grounds that such antinomians claimed that faith alone permitted or excused immoral conduct. For Luther, persons sincere in their faith and who are guided by the Holy Spirit would not intentionally act immorally, consciously not submit to God's laws, or not seek forgiveness for sins.²⁸ Sin comes about naturally as part of humanity's depravity, but this does not excuse willful and unconscionable sinful acts. Through Rabbit, Updike illustrates Luther's delicate balancing act between Lutheranism's antinomian tendency and adherence to moral law. Rabbit sins, but not maliciously; he sins in the spirit of Luther's order to "sin boldly" or to sin as an expression of faith, a paradox indeed, but nevertheless consistent with Luther's theology. Rabbit's sins manifest from his angst, his spiritual longing, the tension between flesh and soul, all of which Rabbit seeks to satisfy. Thus, he sins from his very sincerity that befuddles the Episcopalian Eccles. Indeed, Eccles accuses Rabbit of being "monstrously selfish" and "a coward" who "doesn't care about right or wrong" (*Run* 115).

As with most other characters in the novel, Eccles condemns Rabbit for violating the sacrament of marriage yet fails to appreciate the depth of Rabbit's spiritual crisis. Eccles misdiagnoses the root of Rabbit and Janice's marital troubles and assumes that Rabbit shares his own superficial qualities, telling him, "It's the strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt" (111). Ruth, though, becomes "a skirt" for Rabbit only when he gives in momentarily to social pressures and returns to Janice as a result of Eccles's meddling; only then does he dismiss her as everyone else does. Otherwise, Updike portrays Ruth, not simply as the whore that other characters see her as, but as Rabbit's spiritual wife as opposed to Janice, his legal one. When Ruth asks Rabbit sarcastically if he thinks they're married, he replies sincerely, "Yes; let's be," just

²⁸ Luther, Martin. "A Treatise against Antinomianism."

before consummating their relationship (68). After they learn of Becky's death, Eccles and his atheist wife, Lucy, argue over Eccles's role in reuniting Rabbit and Janice, which precipitated the baby's drowning. When Lucy asks, "Why *were* you so anxious to get them back together?" Eccles replies, "Marriage is a sacrament," but "half-expects her to laugh" (229). Lucy, though, responds by asking, "Even a bad marriage?" to which Eccles answers, "Yes" (229). Eccles demonstrates his concern not for the spirit of Rabbit and Janice's marriage, but rather the letter of it, highlighting a key difference between Episcopalianism and other Protestant denominations such as the emphasis placed on the sacraments as a conduit for receiving God's grace. Eccles also presumes to know God's plan for Rabbit and sees his duty as acting as God's agent to do his will. Additionally, Eccles thinks that Becky's death has solidified Rabbit and Janice's marriage: "this tragedy, terrible as it is, has at least united you and Janice in a sacred way" (241). However, Rabbit remains wary of the sacrament. Even after Becky's death, the Springers offer Rabbit forgiveness, and his marriage is seemingly healed in the midst of the tragedy. Rabbit then asks Eccles if being a good husband is enough. Eccles, though, misunderstands and replies "You mean to earn forgiveness? I'm sure it is, carried out through a lifetime" (241). Therefore, Eccles believes that Rabbit's respect of the sacrament will earn him forgiveness. However, Rabbit asks instead not for forgiveness, but if marriage is enough for "[t]he thing behind everything" (241) or grace, which for Updike is "our nonmaterial side that seeks out what is good" (qtd. in Trachtenburg 8). Eccles, though, claims not to believe in "the thing" or the "it" as Rabbit does and implores him to believe that his marriage is sacred. Rabbit "clings to this belief, though it seems to bear no relation to the colors and sounds of the big sorrowing house, the dabs

and arcs or late sunshine in the little jingle of plants on the glass table, or the almost wordless supper he and Janice share in her bedroom” (*Run* 241).

Through the Angstrom’s family minister, the Lutheran Fritz Kruppenbach, Updike rebukes Eccles’s Episcopalian theology. Kruppenbach appears as a twentieth-century Luther (he insists in his German accent that Eccles lock himself up to pray).²⁹ Indeed, through Kruppenbach, Updike explicitly invokes America’s Protestant heritage that stemmed in part from Luther’s revolt against the Pope. Nevertheless, Kruppenbach reprimands Eccles for meddling and for placing acts above faith. Eccles, thus, reads as a caricature of a meddling Episcopalian attempting to cure sinners of their sins *before* the Second Coming, and Updike uses Kruppenbach to set him straight. The dispute between Eccles and Kruppenbach serves as a microcosm for the longstanding religious grappling over America’s identity. As Eccles seeks out Kruppenbach in order to help with Rabbit and Janice’s marriage, Kruppenbach chastises the younger clergyman:

[D]o you think this is your job, to meddle in these people’s lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don’t agree with it. You think now your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up the holes and make everything smooth. I don’t think that. I don’t think that’s your job. (*Run* 146)

Continuing his diatribe, Kruppenbach declares:

There is no reason or measure in what we must do ... If Gott [*sic*] wants to end misery He’ll declare the Kingdom now. . . . How big do you think

²⁹ Karl Barth has been referred to as a twentieth-century Martin Luther; in short, Barth attempted to reintroduce the values of the original Reformation into the modern era. Updike has also remarked that critics have overlooked Luther’s influence in his works (Plath 94). Since Barth can be seen as a twentieth-century Luther, Kruppenbach might be best described as an embodiment of the two. And it seems here that Kruppenbach and Eccles replay some of the debates of Luther’s and Barth’s reformations.

your little friends look among the billions that God sees? In Bombay now they die in the streets every minute. . . . *There* is your role: to make yourself an exemplar of faith. *There* is where comfort comes from: faith, not what little finagling a body can do here and there, stirring the bucket. In running back and forth you run from the duty given you by God, to make your faith powerful, so when the call comes you can go out and tell them, ‘Yes, he is dead, but you will see him again in Heaven.’ . . . It’s all in the Book—a thief with faith is worth all the Pharisees. (146-147)³⁰

That Kruppenbach so forcefully denounces Eccles’s efforts, and in effect his theology, is a testament to Updike’s agreement with Kruppenbach’s thought. So too is Eccles’s reaction. Although angered by Kruppenbach, Eccles reacts with a flood of self-doubt, and his previous confident façade begins to crack: “His [Eccles’s] depression is so deep that he tries to gouge it deeper by telling himself *He’s right, he’s right* as he sits behind the pearl-gray steering wheel. He bows his head so his forehead touches an arc of its perfect plastic circle, but he can’t cry; he’s parched. His shame and failure hang downward in him heavy but fruitless” (147).

Remarking on his Lutheran upbringing, Updike states that the “world is fallen,” agreeing with Kruppenbach that human misery is endemic to existence (*Self-*

³⁰ Kruppenbach’s speech to Eccles is similar in content to that of Martin Luther’s letter to a friend that advises:

If you are a preacher of mercy, do not preach an imaginary but the true mercy. If the mercy is true, you must therefore bear the true, not an imaginary sin. God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world. We will commit sins while we are here, for this life is not a place where justice resides. We, however, says Peter (2. Peter 3:13) are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where justice will reign. It suffices that through God's glory we have recognized the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day. Do you think such an exalted Lamb paid merely a small price with a meager sacrifice for our sins? Pray hard for you are quite a sinner. (Luther, Letter)

Consciousness 137). The novel, therefore, admonishes utopian thinking, whether it be from postmillennialists or from the political and cultural ideologies of Updike's era that threatened or had threatened to overtake American society. In the thirties, utopian thinking was behind Hitler's fascism as part of his demented plan to build a perfect Germany; in the forties and fifties it was communism's³¹ and consumerism's competing propaganda that at least shared promises of ending economic misery in addition to the strain of postmillennialism to which I have previously alluded. Utopian thinking also forms one part of another great schism in American Protestantism. Certainly many early American Protestants arrived believing that America offered the promise of a New Israel, and fantasies of a Christian utopia were abundant; such visions are described countless times in histories of American religion. But the visions are not uniform, nor are they coherent, and they are often at odds. Updike's skepticism places him in line with early American critics of a Christian utopia who rejected the Puritans' vision of a paradisiacal Christian theocracy, just as Updike, I have argued, rejected mid-century attempts to correlate America's postwar "success" with evidence of providence. In reaching to the roots of Protestantism, Updike reflects Luther's own rejection of a New Jerusalem initiated by Christian sects. Luther denounced such endeavors as "impatient efforts" and arrogant attempts to force God's hand or to pretend to know God's timetable for the Second Coming (qtd. in Oberman 64). Updike traces the American Protestant lineage from Luther to Cromwell to Sam Adams. In identifying Luther as the fountainhead of Protestantism, Updike implies that the spirit of American Protestant identity is more in

³¹ Remarking on his trip to the Soviet Union in 1964, Updike assesses Communism: "The difference between our empires [the U.S.S.R.'s and the U.S.'s] was not ... six of one and half a dozen of the other. It was Athens and Sparta, light and shadow. Ours was distinctly the better mousetrap" (Updike, *Self Consciousness* 145).

line with Luther than, say, the Puritans, who, in their enthusiasm at the prospect of forging a Christian utopia, had become radicalized from European Calvinists and other more “conscientious” Puritans (Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 40).³²

As Marshall Boswell warns, “Updike is no theologian” but an artist, and his use of theology is “libertine”; therefore, it would be a mistake to read *Rabbit, Run* as simply a call to Lutheranism (24). After all, Kruppenbach may be Luther, but Rabbit certainly is not. Instead, as an elder, conservative Pennsylvania-German, Kruppenbach symbolizes Luther’s Old World orthodoxy while Rabbit is its Americanized progeny. In essence, America as an idea is what Luther hath wrought by igniting the individualist spirit and laying the basis for a more personal and private relationship with God. In their fervency to establish a rigidly enforced Christian community, the Puritans had not only gone against Luther’s rebuke of millennialism (and Calvin’s as well) but also that very strain of individuality through which Luther’s teachings really took hold.³³ In accusing Eccles of trying to play psychologist and cop, Kruppenbach reprimands him for representing the kind of Christian community where the church becomes authoritarian and an agency of social control. For Kruppenbach, the church is a place to express and join in faith only and so the church’s role in the community is a place of voluntary worship rather than an intrusive institution. Eccles represents the social forces that demand Rabbit act in accordance with the rules of the community. Pressuring Rabbit to return to Janice, Eccles attempts to squelch Rabbit’s doubts about his humanist moralizing by telling him that

³² Bercovitch cites Roger Williams and his letters to John Cotton as examples of resistance to the more radical American Puritans.

³³ Indeed, early Americans increasingly reacted against rigid visions of the Christian community, especially those that entirely threatened to subsume all secular life. Second, the flocking of the masses to Luther away from the Catholic Church is a phenomenon often attributed less to the specifics of Luther’s theology than to its general implications for each individual.

man's relationship to God "was all settled centuries ago, in the heresies of the early Church" (115). However, Rabbit senses Eccles's disingenuousness: "It hits Rabbit depressingly that [Eccles] really wants to be told. Underneath all this I-know-more-about-it-than-you heresies-of-the-early-Church business he really wants to be told about it, wants to be told that it is there, that he's not lying to all those people every Sunday" (115).

Rabbit instinctively rejects that his intuitive faith could be so easily dismissed on Eccles's human terms.³⁴ Eccles's later confrontation with Kruppenbach and his subsequent self-doubt confirm Rabbit's instincts. Rabbit explains to Eccles that he doesn't "know about all this theology, but I'll tell you I *do* feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this . . . there's something that wants me to find it" (110). To Rabbit, God "seems obvious" (79) and despite Ruth's "mocking and "Eccles's blinking," God's existence appears "plain, standing here, that if there is this floor there is a ceiling, that the true space in which we live is upward space" (99). Upon first meeting Rabbit, Eccles attempts to gauge Rabbit's sense of morality, and when he sees that Rabbit is unremorseful about leaving Janice, Eccles is surprised when Rabbit answers "without hesitation" that he believes in God (92). Rabbit's confident pronouncement startles him because of the seeming disconnection between Rabbit's lack of moral responsibility and yet his sincere belief. For Rabbit, feeling God has nothing to do with one's morality; God is there no matter what, for Luther writes "No sin can separate us from Him even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day" (Luther, Letter). Eccles

³⁴ It has been widely pointed out that Rabbit's name signifies his instinctual nature.

remains both mystified and fascinated by Rabbit's sense of God and the mysterious "it" or "thing" for which Rabbit professes to be searching:

"Harry," he asks, sweetly yet boldly, "why have you left her? You're obviously deeply involved with her."

"I told ja. There was this thing that wasn't there."

"What thing? Have you ever seen it? Are you sure it exists?" (114)

Exasperated with Rabbit's inability to articulate "the thing," Eccles demands, "What is it? What *is* it? Is it hard or soft? Harry. Is it blue? Is it red? Does it have polka dots?" (115).

Eccles is unable to understand that his demand to have the "it" named or described undermines the notion of faith, of believing in what cannot be seen or articulated.

Additionally, Eccles's desperateness comes partly from his realization that Rabbit does not need him or any other intermediary in order to know or feel God. By emphasizing his feelings, Rabbit not only resists Eccles's oppressive dogma, but also exemplifies the uniqueness of the American religious experience.

Harold Bloom argues that the "God of the American Religion is an experiential God, so radically within our being as to become a virtual identity with what is most authentic (oldest and best) in the self" (259). Bloom dubs the peculiarity of the American religion as a form of Gnosticism or an intuitive, private knowledge of God. Citing William James's "Emersonianism," Bloom observes that the "crucial elements that mark the American difference" in religion are "solitude, individuality, and the pragmatism of feelings, acts, and experiences . . . *Awareness*, centered on the self, is faith for an American" and "that our partly hidden national religion teaches us a purely inner freedom" (25-26). Although Bloom points to the 1801 religious gathering at Cane Ridge

as a seminal moment in the development of America's religious idiosyncrasies,³⁵ the trail leads further to the Reformation and its aftershocks. For instance, Bercovitch, similar to Updike, reaches further back to Luther in locating the origins of Western individualism that culminated in the American sense of self (Bercovitch, *Puritan Origins* 11). Bloom also notes that Williams James "permanently marked the American sense of religion" in describing it as "wholly experiential": (quoting James) "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (qtd. in Bloom 25). In his speech *Emersonianism*, predating Bloom's work by seven years, Updike calls Emerson "the prophet of the new American religion" and observes that Emerson and Barth share similar concerns over the loss of faith in modern Christianity (Updike, *Emersonianism*, 7). Rabbit is the inheritor of that particular kind of belief that has run thick through the American Protestant bloodline and embodies those crucial American elements. He partly "exhibits Emerson's positive view of the universe" and "even believes that the universe is somehow created for him" (De Bellis 158). Furthermore, Rabbit also exhibits the Emersonian thought that it always seemed to him that, "Life was ahead of theology, and the people knew more than the preachers taught" (Emerson, "Contemplations," 137).

Another uniquely American feature is what Eccles refers to when he calls Rabbit "monstrously selfish;" theologian Philip J. Lee, from whom Bloom borrows the idea of the Gnostic Protestant, calls this the exalting of the self over the community, where "society is sacrificed in the individualism of American spiritual life" (*Run* 115) (Bloom

³⁵ Bloom, though, is more interested in tracing America's religious heritage as it relates to fundamentalism than uncovering the entire historical development of how Cane Ridge came to be.

27). For Bloom, the problem resides in the Gnostic belief—which began, like Christianity, he argues, as a Jewish heresy—that retained “the spark” of the “uncreated, of God” and leads to the elevation of self over community (27). Updike, too, is aware of the conundrum he has created. As much as Rabbit feels God or searches for the “it,” Updike infuses Rabbit with enough selfishness to make readers recoil in disgust from his actions. Arrogant and full of himself—“I’m lovable,” he tells Ruth—Rabbit audaciously boasts that he is a saint (*Run* 124). Remarking on the havoc he wreaks by leaving Janice, he declares, “If you have the guts to be yourself . . . other people’ll pay your price” (*Run* 129). Donald Greiner notes that Updike recognized the unsolvable problem in *Rabbit, Run*: “Updike explains: ‘There is no reconciliation between the inner, intimate appetites and the external consolations of life . . . there is no way to reconcile these individual wants and the very real need of any society to set strict limits and to confine its members’” (Greiner, *John Updike’s Novels*, 50).

As Ruth tells Rabbit after he leaves Janice and comes to stay with her, “Say. You really think you have it made,” and later, after he takes a part-time gardening job from the elderly, fawning Mrs. Smith, “look at all you’ve got. You’ve got Eccles to play golf with every week and to keep your wife from doing anything to you. You’ve got your flowers, and you’ve got Mrs. Smith in love with you. You’ve got me” (*Run* 124). Rabbit’s best of both worlds existence, though, is destined to collapse, not out of direct punishment for his sins, but because tragedy and suffering are also endemic to existence. As Greiner observes, Updike does not make the mistake of assuming that Thomas Jefferson’s insistence that the “pursuit of happiness” promises its fulfillment (Greiner, “Updike,” 150). Instead, in *Rabbit, Run* Updike takes Jefferson’s idea of pursuit literally. Rabbit’s

run, his pursuit of happiness, appears perpetual, as Greiner also notes, “Like America, Updike’s characters seek recurring confirmation of their innocence” (150). Indeed, at Becky’s funeral Rabbit horrifies Janice and the rest of the gallery by insisting that they recognize his innocence in Becky’s death:

“Don’t look at *me*,” he says. “I didn’t kill her.” This comes out of his mouth clearly, in tune with the simplicity he feels now in everything. Heads talking softly snap around at a voice so sudden and cruel. They misunderstand. He just wants this straight. He explains to the heads, “You all keep acting as if *I* did it. I wasn’t anywhere near. *She’s* the one.” He turns to her [Janice], and her face, slack as if slapped, seems hopelessly removed from him. “Hey it’s O.K.,” he tells her. “You didn’t mean to.” He tries to take her hand but she snatches it back like from a trap and looks toward her parents, who step toward her. His face burns. His embarrassment is savage. Forgiveness was in his heart and now it’s hate. He hates his wife’s face. She doesn’t *see*. She had a chance to join him in truth, and she turned away. He sees that among the heads even his mother’s horrified, blank with shock, a wall against him; she asks what have they done to him then she does it too. A suffocating sense of injustice blinds him. He turns and runs. (*Run* 253)

Just as Rabbit horrifies the gallery with what it sees as his monstrous selfishness and his cowardly refusal to accept responsibility, Janice horrifies Rabbit by refusing “to join him in truth,” or to recognize the paradoxical nature of their shared human predicament: They are guilty only of being human, but they are both innocent because of their inherent

destiny to suffer (253). Rabbit, though, lacks the ability to adequately articulate any of this to those who stand around him, so his outburst only further disgusts the onlookers. Since he cannot make them understand, Rabbit runs, disconnecting himself from the communal show of grief. He is equally dismayed that the community believes it can share in his personal torment and that the ritual of the funeral can somehow rectify Becky's death: Eccles and the other mourners are "false," all of them "except his dead daughter" and his own private grief (*Run* 251). Rabbit stays to true to himself, rejecting another one of Eccles's sacraments.

Rabbit runs, but as Greiner notes, Updike's sympathy may go with him but his approval does not, or perhaps more succinctly, Rabbit has no other choice but to face his society. Updike states that in preparing for the sequel, *Rabbit Redux*, he imagined that Rabbit "would have run around the block, returned to Mt. Judge and Janice, faced what music there was, and be now an all too-settled working man" (Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom*, xiii). For characters on the fringes of society like Dean Moriarty who continue on the road, their spirit for the perpetual physical quest eludes the reality for most Americans that Updike wants to explore. This is why Updike's novel inverts the typical road narrative to which Kerouac's novel adheres. Kerouac's novel, at least in regard to the chronotope, is typical of the road narratives that unfold:³⁶ characters meet in chance encounters, they have adventures. Rabbit's road is his alone, he meets no one of significance, and he circles back to Mt. Judge. His American reality is that irresolvable tension between individual freedom and the demands of society. More pointedly, though,

³⁶ In addition to *On the Road* and the aforementioned *Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick*, other novels that exemplify the "road" or travel novel in American literature are Mark Twain's *Roughing It* (1872) and *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), and Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971).

Updike has chosen to pinpoint Rabbit's predicament as a true American whose country seems to be losing its identity.

Rabbit Redux: Rabbit's Tangled Garden

Rabbit Redux (1971) takes place in 1969, ten years after the events of *Rabbit, Run*. In this sequel to *Rabbit, Run* (1960), we learn that Rabbit and Janice reconciled not long after their daughter's funeral, and for ten years have been living a typical blue collar existence. Janice, though, turns the tables on Rabbit by having an affair with her co-worker, Charlie Stavros, and moves in with him, leaving Rabbit with their thirteen-year old son Nelson. Once the nonconformist, Rabbit is a passionate supporter of the Vietnam War and all things (white) American. Nevertheless, in Janice's absence, he takes in an eighteen-year-old hippie, Jill, and a black Vietnam veteran-turned-radical, Skeeter. Intolerant of having a white girl living with a black man, Rabbit's white neighbors set fire to his house, killing Jill, while Skeeter narrowly escapes. In the aftermath, Rabbit and Janice move toward another reconciliation while Rabbit reconsiders his rabid patriotism.

Updike claims that he had not thought of writing a sequel to *Rabbit, Run* until 1970. As the author explains, he turned to writing *Rabbit Redux* in order to fulfill an obligation to his publisher, Alfred K. Knopf, after failing to produce a work about James Buchanan, a fellow Pennsylvanian and the ignominious President who was either unfortunate enough to be president on the eve of the Civil War or whose gross incompetency hastened the nation's worst outbreak of internal violence in its history.³⁷ Updike saw in Buchanan a sympathetic figure, a president whose practicality has been

³⁷ Updike published the closet drama *Buchanan Dying* in 1974. In the foreword to the 2000 Stackpole edition, Updike correlates Buchanan to Johnson as a President also vilified. Updike states that "LBJ, rightly or wrongly, thought he was saving kids from worse wars" by fighting in Vietnam (Updike, *Buchanan Dying* ix).

overlooked, a president who was torn apart by the raging extremists on both sides of the war. Nevertheless, the historical context of *Rabbit Redux* makes clear that Updike had exasperated presidents and national strife on his mind when he commenced writing *Redux* two years after the events of the novel take place. As late as 1968, Updike was defending “poor” Lyndon Johnson “and his pitiful and ineffective war machine” to “a world of rabid anti-establishments militants,” a group that included Philip Roth (*Self-Consciousness* 132). In defending Johnson and Vietnam, Updike remarks, he realized that he was not only defending America but also himself, he and America rolled into one (132). Updike asserts that by 1967 the “orderly civil-rights strategies” had morphed into a

Yippiesh carnival of mischievous voodoo and street theatre, and finally, a nightmare of anarchy, of window-smashing and cop-bopping and drug-tripping and shouting down. The shouting down part of it, the totalitarian intolerance and savagery epitomized by the Weathermen, but to some extent adopted by student radicals everywhere, amazed me. Authority to these young people was Amerika, a blood-stained bugaboo to be crushed at any cost. (133)

Updike, though, insists he was a liberal, that he had never bought into the Republican “hatred of governmental activism,” and that, as a member of a blue-collar family, it was ingrained in him that the Democratic Party was the party of the poor and working class. Further, Vietnam, Updike claims, was “a liberal cause,” an “intervention against a Communist bully” begun by Truman and intensified by Eisenhower, Kennedy, and ultimately Johnson (130). (Updike quotes the address by Carl Oglesby at a 1965 Washington, D.C. rally that identified Truman as a “mainstream liberal,” Eisenhower as a

“moderate liberal, and Kennedy as a “flaming liberal” who all supported and escalated action in Vietnam [qtd. in Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 130]).³⁸ Updike’s feeling that in defending the US he was defending himself is a defensiveness that Rabbit shares in *Redux*. Arguing about Vietnam with Janice’s lover Charlie Stavros, Rabbit feels “frantic, the thoughts of the treachery and ingratitude befouling the flag, befouling him” (*Redux* 39).

However, Rabbit’s views on Vietnam derive not from Updike’s liberalism, but, as Stavros puts it, from Rabbit’s imperialist racism (*Redux* 40). Liberal defenders of Kennedy’s and Johnson’s Vietnam policies saw American intervention in the war as the US standing up against communist aggression, a mission often articulated as humanitarian. Indeed, Updike cites atrocities committed by the Viet Cong and North Vietnam prior to the US’s large scale invasion and the lack of free elections in both North and South Vietnam as reasons for his position. Rabbit’s defense of the war, however, rests mainly on the imperialism and racism that Stavros points out. The distinction underlies the frustration Updike must have felt seeing his “liberal” position being conflated with the likes of Barry Goldwater (to whom Updike refers as a “warmonger” [Updike, *Self-Consciousness* 124]) and other conservative and silent majority Americans. Janice refers to Rabbit disparagingly as “silent majority” and an “Ugly American” (*Redux* 40, 33). Rabbit echoes some of Updike’s sentiments: that war is sometimes necessary and that imperialism and atrocities committed by communist nations and armies were being ignored. Quoting W.H. Auden, a supporter of the Vietnam War, Updike highlights

³⁸Oglesby was a member of the Students for a Democratic Society. The SDS authored the 1962 Port Huron Statement, which, in effect, distinguished the New Left from the Old Left and called for participatory democracy.

Auden's belief that many protesters were against the war not for humanitarian reasons: "They believe," Auden writes, "rightly or wrongly, it would be better if the communists won" (qtd. in Updike, *Self-Consciousness* 120).³⁹ The split among liberals over Vietnam catalyzed the emergence of the New Left from the Old, and Updike's alignment with the latter is clearly evident. By 1968, Updike, though, recommended in the pages of the *New Yorker* that Johnson resign, and wrote that if his successor could not correct mistakes and improve the situation in Vietnam then the US should withdraw. The following year, exasperated with the war and the civil unrest within the US, Updike left for England.

As his suggestions in the *New Yorker* indicate and as he explains in *Self-Consciousness*, Updike was willing to reexamine his position on Vietnam and his sense of loyalty to the United States and support of its policies. On one hand, Updike states, his generation experienced the relatively uncontroversial wars of World War II and Korea, both led by liberal, Democratic Presidents, and the latter was generally fought on the same principles used to justify Vietnam. Additionally, his German-Lutheran upbringing had made him averse to revolution and inclined to accept the will of democratically elected leaders, leading to his "delusional filial attachment to Lyndon Baines Johnson" (*Self-Consciousness* 139). Finally, his 1964 trip to the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc nations filled him with a "hardened antipathy to Communism" (145).⁴⁰ However, in rethinking his beliefs, Updike reflects that perhaps "the System" had let his family down in the crash that set off the Depression, costing his grandfather his money and his father

³⁹ Updike points out that the *New York Times* erroneously declared him to be the only major American writer supportive of American action in Vietnam. Updike notes not only W. H. Auden but also Marianne Moore and James Michener. Updike dismisses as cavalier Norman Mailer's response that "maybe we need a war. It may be the last of the tonics" (qtd. in Updike, *Self-Consciousness* 120).

⁴⁰ In an exchange between Updike and Arthur Miller about meeting the Soviets, Miller quipped, "Jesus, don't they make you glad you're an American?" (*Self-Consciousness* 146).

his job. Second, Vietnam had pulled Americans into a fight with one another, making “it impossible to ignore politics, to cultivate serenely my garden of private life and printed artifact” (134). He adds that the Vietnam protests had brought together blacks, gays, and women in a fight for civil rights and that “with Woodstock, *Barbarella*, and *The Joy of Sex* and the choral nudity of *Hair*, there was a consciously retrieved Edenic innocence, a Blakeian triumph of the youthful human animal” (154). Updike’s conflicted self serves as a microcosm for the divided nation during the Vietnam era, which *Rabbit Redux* dramatizes.

Although Rabbit spouts some of Updike’s own arguments in defense of the Vietnam War, Updike infuses Rabbit with a strain of racism in an attempt to typify white Middle America’s views on the war and the Civil Rights movement. Through *Rabbit Redux*, Updike acknowledges that the lines between Old Left liberalism and Goldwater conservatism had indeed become so blurred that he was frightened at the prospect of finding himself tacitly in agreement with conservatives about Vietnam: “Was I a conservative? I didn’t think so,” Updike asks rhetorically in regard to his position, unsure of the line between conservatism and liberalism (134). Although Updike declared Vietnam to be a liberal war, Rabbit characterizes Stavros’s anti-war stance as a liberal view: “We’ve stopped [dropping bombs]; we’ve stopped like all you liberals were marching for and what did it get us?” (*Redux* 39). Stavros comes off as better informed and more knowledgeable than Rabbit, who exclaims at one point during their argument that “I don’t *think* about politics. . . . That’s one of my Goddam precious American rights, not to think about politics” (38). Indeed, in the later novels Stavros becomes someone that Rabbit looks to for advice and insight on American society. Early in *Redux*, Updike

paints Rabbit as a man full of racism and, given Updike's own views on the war, curiously he seems intent on linking Rabbit's racism to his views on Vietnam. In the opening pages of the novel, Rabbit thinks the bus he's riding home on "has too many Negroes" and that they are like "seeds of some tropical plant" that are "taking over the garden. His garden. Rabbit knows it's his garden and that's why he's put a flag decal on the back of the Falcon even though Janice says it's corny and fascist" (10-11). The flag decal serves as a source of tension between Rabbit and Stavros that ignites their argument over Vietnam. When Janice tells Stavros that she was not the one who put the decal on the car, Rabbit interjects:

"What's wrong with it" he asks them both. "It's our flag, isn't it?"

"It's somebody's flag," Stavros says, not liking this trend and softly bouncing his fingertips together under his sheltered bad eyes.

"But not yours, huh?"

"Harry gets fanatical about this," Janice warns.

"I don't get fanatical, I just get a little upset about people who come over here to make a fat buck . . ."

"I was born here," Stavros quickly says, "So was my father."

". . . and then knock the fucking flag," Rabbit continues, "like it's some piece of toilet paper."

"A flag is a flag. It's just a piece of cloth."

"It's more than just a piece of cloth to me." (37-38)

By placing the flag on his car, Rabbit symbolically plants the flag in his garden, which he sees as being threatened not only by blacks but by "ethnic" Americans (Stavros is

ethnically Greek, prompting Rabbit's insinuation that he's an immigrant). The narrator, though, pokes fun at Rabbit's thoughts. Rabbit thinks that blacks are "[c]ertainly dumber" than whites but then thinks that "being smart hasn't amounted to so much, the atom bomb and the one-piece aluminum beer can. And you can't say Bill Cosby's stupid," prompting the narrator's tongue-in-cheek remark that Rabbit's "educated tolerant thoughts" lead to "a certain fear" of blacks being "so noisy" (11). Rabbit's thoughts then immediately shift from blacks to privileged Northeastern white kids who smash up their well-to-do parents' homes in Connecticut, partying while "their parents are away in the Bahamas" (11). Rabbit thinks, "More and more the country is getting like that. As if it just grew here instead of people laying down their lives to build it" (11). Here Updike foreshadows Skeeter, the militant black, and Jill, the New England rich kid-turned-strung-out-hippie, who personify those who are ruining Rabbit's garden.

Why, then, does the novel portray the hero of his novel, a character who shares the author's support for US involvement in Vietnam, as a "typical good-hearted imperialist racist" (40)? As discussed earlier, Updike's run-in with Roth and arguments with his wife over Vietnam forced him to reconsider his personal allegiance to the United States and its leaders. Later, Updike writes, "As for my patriotic duty to my country, I feel, as I age, less anxious about that" (*Self-Consciousness* 170). In *Rabbit, Run*, Updike points to the private self, for better or for worse, as embodying the American spirit and dismisses as equally damaging society's attempts to control Rabbit or make him conform; for Rabbit's transgressions are the cost of individual freedom. The conformity and corporate propaganda prevalent in the 1950s, I have argued, affected Updike enough to inspire the creation of Rabbit, an American man striving to hold onto his individuality.

However, the civil unrest of the 1960s had the opposite effect on Updike in characterizing Rabbit. Rabbit's innate rebelliousness in *Run* springs from his heritage of rebellions; his Protestant heritage is crucial to his resistance to social norms. Yet, as I have noted, Updike states that his German-Lutheran roots made him averse to social and political revolution—the protesting spirit in his Protestantism having dissipated in the wake of the Vietnam protests. Similarly, Luther admonished political revolutionaries while he himself had launched a revolution. What Updike had feared is what Luther had feared: a complete breakdown in necessary institutions and state apparatuses that prevent utter social chaos. For Updike, lack of respect for democratically elected officials and the democratic process threatened to unravel the nation's binding, and the most radical elements of the 1960s political dissidents offered no better alternative to American democracy. In both *Run* and *Redux*, Updike presents the image of the garden. In *Run*, the garden serves as the place where Rabbit finds meaningful work. Working temporarily for Mrs. Smith in her garden, Rabbit

loves folding the hoed ridge of crumbs of soil over the seeds. Sealed they cease to be his. The simplicity. Getting rid of something by giving it to itself. God Himself folded into the tiny adamant structure, Self-destined to a succession of explosions, the great slow gathering out of water and air and silicon: this is felt without words in the turn of the round hoe-handle in his palms. (*Run* 117)

Read in contrast to his other job as a salesman, the passage conveys a meaning simple enough: Rabbit in *Run* has lacked his private garden in which he has a spiritual connection to the fruits of his labor. Updike shares in the mythos that the American

dream rests on the cultivation of the private sphere, hence his lament that Vietnam did not allow him “to cultivate serenely [his] garden of private life and printed artifact” (*Self-Consciousness* 134). In *Redux*, however, Rabbit’s garden has gone public: the entire physical and noetic space that is America. In the ten years between the events of *Run* and *Redux*, Rabbit has conformed to the standards of Eisenhower America, and more significantly, he has had to settle into the type of soulless work that helped spur his escapades of the previous novel. In the opening of *Redux*, Rabbit and his father, who is also his coworker, are described as men beaten down by their monotonous profession:

A man and his son, Earl Angstrom and Harry, are among the printers released from work. The father is near retirement, a thin man with no excess left to him, his face washed empty by grievances and caved in above the protruding slippage of bad false teeth. The son is five inches taller and fatter; his prime is soft, somehow pale and sour. The small nose and slightly lifted upper lip that once made the nickname Rabbit fit now seem, along with the thick waist and cautious stoop bred into him by a decade of the Linotyper’s trade, clues to weakness, a weakness verging on anonymity. (*Redux* 3)

That Rabbit and his father are “released” from work suggests a prison-like regimen or at the very least a form of societal servitude that has driven out their (especially Rabbit’s) vivacity. Indeed, Janice tells Rabbit that she appreciates he has worked “in that dirty place” for her and that there have been “a lot of days . . . when I was sorry you came back that time. You were a beautiful brainless guy and I’ve had to watch that guy die day by day” (*Redux* 57, 63). Rabbit’s frustrations are further increased by his

own failure to tend properly the private garden of his marriage and home. In the years since Becky's death, Rabbit and Janice's marriage has been lacking sexually; Janice exclaims to Stavros, her lover, that Rabbit "refused to have another child" as a result of Becky's death (41). Rabbit confesses to her that "ever since that happened to Becky, I haven't been that much for sex" (59). Having been more or less coerced into his mundane life, Rabbit feels that those around him have betrayed him. In addition to the discovery of Janice's infidelity, he runs into Eccles who now has eschewed the ministry in favor of the counterculture. In reference to his behavior in *Run*, Rabbit tells Stavros, "Everybody now is like the way I used to be" (156). Indeed, Janice is now the adulterer, trying to find herself, and those around him are, to borrow from Timothy Leary, turning on, tuning in, and dropping out as he once wished to do. In lieu of his private garden, Rabbit transfers his life's frustrations into his energetic patriotism and imaginatively claims America as his own. As a blue-collar worker, Rabbit identifies with the pioneers who had to lay "down their lives to build" the nation (11). In their ignorance of history, Rabbit and other Silent Majority characters, though, deny that black and "ethnic" Americans are part of the same legacy of hardworking citizens: blacks want a free ride, Jews cheat, and darker Europeans are disloyal opportunists. Rabbit thinks that white men "have to get on with the job, making America great" and declares that "You can't turn on television now without some blackface spitting at you. Everybody from Nixon on down is sitting up nights trying to figure out how to make 'em all rich without putting 'em to the trouble of doing any work . . . the Negroes plus the rich kids, who want to pull it all down" (41). He rationalizes that Janice is a victim of Stavros's Greek slickness and social climbing: he reminds Janice that she is "the boss's daughter" while laying out Stavros's

motivations for sleeping with her (62). “All these Greeks and Polacks or whatever are on the make,” he adds (55). Unable to come to terms with his own failures as a husband and earner, Rabbit finds blacks and others whom he deems to be tearing down the country to be scapegoats for his own inadequacies.

Thus, Updike illustrates the underlying reasons for the Silent Majority’s nationalism as distinguished from his own and Old Left liberals’. Rabbit, as representative of the Silent Majority attributes the country’s economic woes to the “freebies” supposedly handed out to and demanded by blacks, a feeling intensified by the Civil Rights movement. Second, the racist assumptions that blacks and other marginalized groups either do not want to work or have gamed the system excludes them from the American mythos of a nation built solely by and for hardworking Christian pioneers. By denying blacks and other groups their American identity, Rabbit frames the attacks on US foreign and domestic policy as orchestrated by those disloyal to the United States. Indeed, Fred Springer, Rabbit’s father-in-law, exhibits Cold War paranoia, claiming that “Jewish Communists” had conspired with Joseph Kennedy as “honest businessmen who’d put this country on the map were losing their shirts” (71). Springer’s political theories implicate Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson as presidents who wanted to “turn the economy upside down” and start wars in order “to get the coloreds up” (70). Springer’s hatred for Roosevelt (he says FDR had “maggots in the brain” [70]) typifies radical Republican disgust for Roosevelt’s New Deal during the Depression and the view that World War II was a way to “bail Democrats out of their crazy economics” (70). Rabbit’s father shows the same distrust of Republicans that Springer does for Democrats, claiming that Johnson “did a lot for the little man” while the “Republicans

don't do a thing" for them (9). Rabbit, though, does not go as far as believing Mr. Springer's and his father's partisanship; instead, he replies to Springer that "I think . . . about America, it's still the only place" (71). Additionally, rather than affiliate with a particular party, Rabbit supports whoever is president and saw World War II as a benevolent endeavor, a war that was "fought across oceans so he could spin out his days in happiness" (19). Rabbit conflates obeisance to American policymakers as evidence of faith in the American ideal and conflates the government and its actions with the imaginary actions of an abstract, heavenly force. Looking over his father, Rabbit observes that he "stands whittled by the great American glare, squinting in the manna of blessings that come down from the government, shuffling from side to side in nervous happiness that his day's work is done, that beer is inside him, that Armstrong is above him, that the US is the crown and stupefaction of human history" (10). Later, he dreamily muses that "America is beyond power, it acts as in a dream, as a face of God. Wherever America is, there is freedom, and wherever America is not, madness rules with chains, and darkness strangles millions. Beneath her patient bombers, paradise is possible" (41).

Rabbit's conflation of America with God is consistent with the kind of nationalism that Will Herberg had called "civic religion" in the 1950s and sociologist Robert Bellah coined as "civil religion" in 1967.⁴¹ John Wilson observes that both Herberg and Bellah recognize that in the postwar era allegiance to America had taken on religious qualities that were superseding traditional religious ties (Wilson 60-61). Indeed,

⁴¹ Although Bellah wrote that America's civil religion can be used for good, he also warned and acknowledged that it is "being used today [referring to Vietnam] for petty interests and ugly passions" (7).

instead of the mysterious “It”—the “thing” behind all things—Rabbit’s search has led to finding God as America. Benedict Anderson argues that “nationalist imagining . . . suggests a strong affinity with religious imaginings” (10). Eisenhower had declared that America must be a religious nation, and in his inaugural address Kennedy asked God for his blessing to do his work here on Earth. Although presidents invoking God is not unique, when seen in the particular contexts of the end of World War II and the Cold War, these statements resonate with political implications. Furthermore, coming from such popular presidents, these kinds of statements had propagandistic effects on the American psyche. Since communists were seen as atheists and therefore “godless,” America’s opposition to communism purports a religious endeavor, America not only on the side of freedom, but on the side of God. The more internally dangerous effect of this view is that any political dissidents who opposed America’s involvement in Vietnam could be lumped with communists, and, therefore, seen as domestic enemies (such lists were in fact kept by the FBI and those on the list were obsessively investigated by Nixon). Indeed, Rabbit calls Stavros, a critic of the war, a commie. Additionally, Anderson defines a nation as an “imagined political community” where in “the minds of each live the image of their communion” (6).

Rabbit thinks that he and America share the same beliefs and goals, and those beliefs and goals are imagined as monolithic, common to those within the nation. In defending US involvement in Vietnam to Stavros, Rabbit repeatedly uses *we* in describing American action in Vietnam. Thus, Rabbit also conflates the individual with the nation as if the nation acts in the interest of each individual citizen and with each person’s consent. Rabbit’s assumption that the government’s actions reflect the nation’s

unanimous will suggests Fredric Jameson's notion of "situational consciousness" or what Houmi Bhaba calls national allegory "where the telling of an individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collective self" (Jameson 86). Inevitably, as Edward Said famously notes, a nation comes to define itself against its imagined creation of other nations and cultures (Bhaba 4). Instead of a nation being a whole, it is quilted together not only from what is shared in the collective memory but what its citizens collectively think that the nation shares in common and what they believe distinguishes them from others.

Updike's criticism of American society in *Rabbit, Run*, I argue, is a counternarrative that opposes the notion of America's emergence as a world power as ordained by God. In *Redux*, this counternarrative becomes strikingly more pointed. As opposed to the Rabbit of *Run*, who is interested only in his private self, the Rabbit of *Redux* exemplifies the private consciousness that, as Hannah Arendt states, "assumes public significance" and flows into a "hybrid realm" (33). For Updike, if America is supposed to be a place that protects cultivation of the private realm, then Rabbit and the Silent Majority fail to uphold this basic American premise since they assume that their private beliefs are the paradigm for the nation—their private interests are enforced publicly and politically to deny other groups their own private gardens. For example, after Jill and Skeeter move into Rabbit's home, two of Rabbit's neighbors, Mahlon Showalter and Eddie Brumbach, confront him about Skeeter's presence. Showalter tells Rabbit that "It wasn't my idea to get after you, I said to [Brumbach], The man has rights of privacy" (*Redux* 251). However, Showalter adds that the real reason that he and Brumbach have confronted Rabbit is that "It's the girl and the black together" and

explains that “Any colored family, with a husband in the house” has his permission to move into the neighborhood (to which Rabbit replies ironically, “It’s nice to meet a liberal”) (251-252). After Rabbit ignores Brumbach’s threat, the neighbors burn Rabbit’s house to the ground, killing Jill. The burning of Rabbit’s house comes from a real-life incident that Updike recalls from his hometown in Shillington, PA, when whites (presumably) set fire to the house of an interracial couple in the 1950s. In relating this incident, Updike expounds on the racism that pervaded his seemingly innocuous hometown:

A single Negro family, the Johnsons, attended Shillington High, and were admired for their singing (the girl) and athletic skill (the boys). When one Johnson boy, however, took a white bride, his house somehow burned down. There seems to be, in this Southeast corner of Pennsylvania, including Philadelphia, a certain Southern illusion of a mutually enjoyed *apartheid*—though in doctrine Penn and the Quakers were radically egalitarian, and in Frederick Douglass’s autobiography the thrilling escape into freedom takes the form of a short train ride from Baltimore to Philadelphia. . . . When I worked as a copyboy for the Reading *Eagle*, I was shocked to hear an editor bawl out one of the photographers for bringing back from the city playgrounds too many shots containing “them.” It was my belief, as of 1950, that the United States’ black tenth had contributed more than their proportionate share to what is distinctive and universally eloquent in American culture, and I believed that realizing

full equality for blacks was our foremost domestic priority. (Updike, *Self-Consciousness*, 66-67)

Influenced by his days as a copyboy, Updike intersperses the news from around the country into the narrative of *Rabbit Redux*. Rabbit's confrontation with Showalter and Brumbach is prefaced by running news media reports on national and local events. As Rabbit comes home from his job as a linotypist, he overhears reports on the television, such as the Civil Rights Commission charging "that the Nixon Administration has made quote a major retreat unquote pertaining to school integration in the southern states" (*Redux* 195). Additionally, the report adds that "In Fayette Mississippi three white Klansmen were arrested for the attempted bombing of the supermarket owned by newly elected black mayor of Fayette, Charles Evers, brother of the slain civil rights leader" (*Redux* 195). Rabbit blames hippies and blacks for violence, but the news reports document many whites' fiery resistance to civil rights and black mobility. Furthermore, as evidenced by attacks against Evers, such whites attempt to continue to deny blacks participation in the democratic process. Moreover, Showalter tries to deny blacks their private gardens by dictating the conditions by which they can gain access to the neighborhood. Brumbach is more intolerant than Showalter, telling Rabbit that "This is a decent white neighborhood" and "that's why we live here instead of across the river in Brewer where they're letting them 'em run wild" (250). Feebly tempering his racism, Brumbach explains that he "fought beside the colored in Vietnam" and had no problem with them since they all "knew the rules" (250-251). Although Brumbach does not state the exact rules, Showalter's immediate admission that it is Jill and Skeeter together that bothers Brumbach and Showalter indicates that even in Vietnam Brumbach expected

blacks not to violate racial taboos. Additionally, Skeeter echoes Updike's assertion that Southern-type apartheid exists in southeastern Pennsylvania. When Rabbit advises that Skeeter should turn himself in because "This isn't the South," Skeeter replies that "the South is everywhere. We are fifty miles from the Mason-Dixon line where we sit, but way up in Detroit they are shooting nigger boys like catfish in a barrel. The news is, the cotton is in. Lynching season is on" (180-181).

Although Rabbit and the Silent Majority accede to the obligation to forget or not learn swaths of American history, Skeeter and, to a lesser extent, Jill serve as voices that demand that America reevaluate its self-serving myths. Rabbit, with a comic crudeness, already senses the racism that underlies the Silent Majority's American narrative, although he is reluctant to fully acknowledge it. Watching a "Carol Burnett Show" skit about the Lone Ranger and Tonto, Rabbit realizes he

knows nothing about Tonto. The Lone Ranger is a white man, so law and order will work to his benefit, but what about Tonto? A Judas to his race, the more disinterested and heroic figure of virtue. When did he get his payoff? Why was he loyal to the masked stranger? In the days of the war one never asked. Tonto was simply "on the side of the right." It seemed a correct dream then, red and white together, red loving white as naturally as stripes in the flag. Where has "the side of the right" gone? (20)

Unlike in *Rabbit, Run*, in *Redux*, Rabbit is conscious of his Americanness and senses the "low flame of loyalty lit with his birth" (41). In *Run*, Rabbit knows that he has lost some essence of his individuality, and his quest to reclaim it is what makes him essentially American. At the opening of *Redux*, though, Rabbit is a beaten man and his delusion is

that in his conformity and rabid nationalism he becomes more American than ever. In reality, Rabbit himself has built nothing, did not serve in World War II, Korea, or Vietnam and is dependent on his father-in-law and father for steady employment. In certain moments, Rabbit acknowledges his faults. In addition to the dullness of his job, his position at the Verity Press is in danger of being eliminated. He tells his mother, “Let’s face it. As a human being I’m about C minus. As a husband I’m about zilch. When Verity folds I’ll fold with it and have to go on welfare” (84). This confession comes shortly after the discovery of Janice’s infidelity, and from here Rabbit’s world begins to turn upside down as he accepts his black co-worker Buchanan’s invitation to join him at a lounge on the edge of Brewer. That Janice’s infidelity sparks Rabbit’s reevaluation of himself and his country is not surprising, since it was the social forces from *Run* that eventually coerced him to return to the marriage and settle into a typical blue collar life. Rabbit’s father had compared Rabbit to “human garbage” and a “bum” for deserting his family while Eccles had promised Rabbit earthly salvation if he respected the sacrament of marriage (*Rabbit Run* 142). Rabbit settled for this postwar version of the American Dream, but Janice’s affair begins to erode the pretensions he has used to justify his life to himself. The Angstroms have fared well enough, having moved to the suburb of Penn Villas and into their own house, although they still live paycheck to paycheck. Though critics often describe Rabbit as passive in the novel, defending America and the war reinvigorate him, as Updike indicates that the sexual energy lacking in his marriage Rabbit reinvests into his passionate arguments about Vietnam. For example, Stavros decides to confront Rabbit over his affair with Janice and to find out about Jill and Skeeter. Instead, Rabbit wants “to argue about Vietnam, but Stavros keeps to the less

passionate subject” (*Redux* 155). But Janice’s affair forces Rabbit to acknowledge his inadequacies, and in turn leads to his reevaluation of his beliefs. Buchanan’s invitation “hums in his ears. Something in what Buchanan said. He was lying down to die, had been lying down for years . . . he has somehow seen everything too often” (89). Rabbit readies himself for the “exotic,” as he had thought of blacks, and the tenor of Buchanan’s invitation hints at adventure: ““Come to Jimbo’s Lounge around nine, ten, see what develops. Maybe nothin’. Maybe sumptin’” (88). Ignoring his inclination to avoid blacks, Rabbit heads to the lounge where “all the people are black” (98). Rabbit senses a fear that “travels up and down his skin” and “hangs like a balloon waiting for a dart” (98). The remainder of the novel details a reeducation for Rabbit, and since racism underlies his presumptions, Updike brings him face to face with what the Silent Majority fears most: the black radical revolutionary. Consequently, Skeeter becomes Rabbit’s real teacher, and his version of history is what Rabbit must reckon with.

Updike’s characterization of Skeeter has remained controversial since he comes close to the tropes of the black Christ-figure and what has become more popularly known in the last decade as the “magical Negro” character.⁴² Both tropes involve a black character who suffers or sacrifices himself for the sake of the flawed white protagonist which leads to the latter’s ultimate redemption. The black Christ-figure correlates more rigorously to the Christian tradition of Christ’s sufferings while the magical Negro is a secular figure whose redemptive power comes from a general spirituality or some other phenomena. As Peter Bailey argues, however, Updike plays with the idea of the Christ-

⁴² The origin of this term is obscure. Rita Kempley, writer for *The Black Commentator*, writes that the term has been popular in cinema circles since the 1950s. In her article, “Stephen King’s Super-Duper Magical Negroes,” the novelist Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu reports that she first heard it from fellow writer Steve Barnes in 2001 (Kempley). Journalist Christopher John Farley discussed the concept in a 2000 article lambasting the Robert Redford film *The Legend of Bagger Vance* for employing the trope (Kempley).

figure in Skeeter and offers a nuanced character who both “represents the best of the 1960s in his defiant questioning of all socioreligious principles and structures” and yet “constitutes simultaneously Updike’s” skepticism of the “age’s attempt to supplant faith with psychohistory, politics, and drugs” (99). Second, Updike prudently holds off on any full-scale redemption for Rabbit—he does not relinquish entirely his stance on Vietnam, nor is his racism expunged. In fact, racial prejudice remains interwoven into Rabbit’s character for the remainder of the tetralogy. Furthermore, Skeeter does not sacrifice himself; in fact, he saves himself from the fire and leaves Jill to burn to death, an act that Rabbit considers cowardly. Skeeter makes *himself* out to be a Christ-figure, but Updike has other ideas about the nature of his character. Skeeter is the monstrosity that American racism has produced: he is both sufferer and punisher, good and evil, Jesus and Satan. Skeeter first impresses Rabbit as “evil” (*Redux* 181), “poison,” and “murder” (185). But Skeeter’s service in Vietnam softens Rabbit’s attitude toward him as a result of Rabbit’s delusional guilt that he should have served in the war (“he likes anybody who fought in Vietnam where he himself should have been fighting” [253]). Where America has failed Skeeter and blacks in general, Updike indicates, is not because of an inherently rotten capitalist system, but rather corrupt governance of that system; further, America has consistently failed to live up to its ideals and the Protestant values on which it was founded. Updike and Rabbit, though, fear that hippies and revolutionaries wanted to “throw the baby out with the bath” (213).

Having seen the ugliness of communism in his trip to the Soviet Union and read of atrocities by Vietnamese communists, Updike was wary of the affinity for Marxism within the counterculture (indeed, Marx’s works are among Skeeter’s books).

Nevertheless, the novel clearly shows that racism has produced a polar extreme and invited alternative political ideas to fester among those disenchanted with the System. Skeeter's criticism of America gets directly to the heart of its Christian roots, a direct affront to Rabbit's Protestant sensibilities. In the lounge, Skeeter exclaims, "The reason they so mean, they have so much religion, right? That big white God tells 'em, Screw that black chick, and they really wangs away 'cause God's right there slappin' away at their butterball asses. Cracker spelled backwards is fucker, right?" (100). Much to the consternation of Babe, the black lounge singer, and Buchanan, Skeeter continues to mock Rabbit and his "white" religion. Offering a cigarette, he says "Waste is a sin, right?" (102). After Rabbit declines, Skeeter concludes, "They're going to live forever, right? . . . God's on their side right? God's white, right? He doesn't want no more Charlies up there to cut into his cake, he has it just fine the way it is, him and all those black angels out in the cotton" (102). Later, he tells Rabbit, "I got news for you. Your God's a pansy. Your white God's queerer than the Queen of Spades. He sucks off the Holy Ghost and makes his son watch. Hey. Chuck. Another thing. Ain't no Jesus. He was a faggot crook, right? They bribed the Romans to get his carcass out of the tomb 'cause it smelled so bad, right?" (183). Skeeter's interjections and insults foreshadow his later history lessons as he hints at the Biblical and theological justifications Protestant Christians used to defend slavery and racism, and using their positions not only to exploit black labor but also to rape black women. Thus, Skeeter poisons for Rabbit the purity of his American mythos and demeans his God and religion as nothing more than a racially constructed deity and ideology designed to politically and economically dominate the country. In contrast to Peter Bailey's view of Skeeter, Marshall Boswell argues that the reader should take

seriously Skeeter's claim that he is Jesus. Boswell specifically notes as evidence Updike's comment that "Skeeter, the angry black, might *be* Jesus. . . . And if that's so, then people *ought* to be very nice to him" (qtd. in Boswell 110).

However, Updike's last remark suggests more of a reply to critics who shared Rabbit's first impression that Skeeter was indeed evil and poison and to critics who referred to Skeeter as an anti-Christ. Updike appears to be asking critics to reconsider their harsh views as, indeed, a closer reading reveals Skeeter to be a sympathetic character, scarred not only by racism but by his service in the Vietnam War (Rabbit asks Skeeter how he avoided getting hurt in Vietnam to which Skeeter replies, "I *was* hurt" [*Rabbit Redux* 230]). Skeeter's proclamation that he is Christ suggests, instead of a fact, an irony the author wants the reader to acknowledge; otherwise, Updike risks careless heavy handedness in driving home the trope. America's history of irreverence for religious ethics and morality has forced Skeeter to lose faith in everything. For Skeeter, the country's entrenched racism is irrevocably intertwined into the Christianity in which he was raised: "They had been wicked, when he was a child, to teach him God was a white man" (230). *Redux* continues Updike's criticism of mid twentieth-century American religiosity from *Rabbit*, *Run*, and Skeeter and Jill represent those who have turned elsewhere for spiritual fulfillment through drugs and, for Skeeter, a new self-centered religion. Skeeter's influence on Rabbit's thirteen-year-old son Nelson and Jill while Rabbit has been at work becomes apparent. Skeeter has Jill tell Rabbit that they are going to have nightly discussions. Jill "nervously" and while "blushing" tells Rabbit that "Skeeter and Nelson and I were talking about it today after school and agreed" that "a structured discussion might be helpful and educational" (198).

Using Jill to persuade Rabbit to participate, Skeeter sets his goal to get Rabbit, a white man, to listen. Jill explains to Rabbit that “the reason Skeeter annoys and frightens you is you don’t know a thing about his history, I don’t mean his personal history so much as the history of his race, how he got to where he is. Things like riots and welfare have jumped into the newspapers out of nowhere for you” and adds that they will now discuss “Afro-American history” (200). Rabbit unknowingly takes the bait and asks, “why do so few American Negroes want to give up their cadillacs and, excuse the expression, colored televisions and go back to Africa?” (200). Updike writes ominously that in answer to his question, “Skeeter begins,” the self-fashioned black Jesus having waited precisely for this rhetorical opening (200). At first, Rabbit asserts his authority in the house. Barging in from work, he announces that he is sick of the word “black” and orders Jill to get the “darker of your boyfriends” out of the house (196). Skeeter, relishing the opportunity to educate Rabbit, is glad to see Rabbit act stereotypically; he says that he loves when Rabbit “gets like this. He is the Man” (196). Seizing the moment, Skeeter inverts the power dynamic within the household as Rabbit becomes a passive listener and eventually a disciple to Skeeter’s religion. In role playing, Skeeter becomes the house master and Rabbit and Jill the black male and female slave, respectively. Additionally, Rabbit takes notice of the racists around him, from his white neighbors to his own father. But Rabbit’s belief is short lived. After his conversion, Rabbit begins to sense a danger in Skeeter’s influence; as a wild cry for normalcy, he calls Peggy Fossnacht (a substitute for Janice in her absence) and arranges a date. In defamiliarizing America for Rabbit, Skeeter forces him to acknowledge the realities of history; instead of seeing America dreamily, Rabbit must deal with the concreteness of its sins. Skeeter succeeds in getting Rabbit to

acknowledge these sins, but the two—angry black and angry white—seem lost as what to do about it. Rabbit wants to retreat back into domesticity, but he cannot bear to admit that he wants Janice back or to lose face to Stavros by asking him to end the affair. For Skeeter, he can imagine only destruction, and this path Rabbit refuses to follow. At this crux, both men act irresponsibly. Having retreated from Skeeter's precipice, Rabbit, by calling Peggy Fosnacht, decides to cast off Jill along with Skeeter. Rabbit suggests that Jill call her mother and have her mother come and get her. He ignores that Skeeter gets Jill re-hooked on drugs, and against Nelson's pleas to stay home, he goes to Peggy's, leaving a drug-entranced Jill alone with Skeeter. And Updike pulls back from allowing Skeeter to be redemptive. Rabbit later confesses to Skeeter that he does believe that Skeeter is the "Christ of the new Dark Age" (241). Although Skeeter enlightens Rabbit on American history, he can see only chaos as the answer.

Skeeter's taste for violence becomes apparent when he first arrives at Rabbit's house. Although he protests that he is about love, the thought of violence excites him. He goads Rabbit into punching him and is thrilled when he sees clashes between protesters and police on the television. At one point, the news reports that civil rights leader Robert Williams has returned to the country. Skeeter gleefully points out to Rabbit that Williams, who influenced militant strains of the Civil Rights Movement, has come back to "fry your ass" (196). That Skeeter enjoys violence points back to Rabbit's own affinity for it. As I noted earlier, Stavros observed that "burning up gook babies" thrilled Rabbit as much as the war's politics (40). And, indeed, in discussing Vietnam, Rabbit and Skeeter appreciate the war for its blood and death. Rabbit asks Skeeter, "Is our being in Vietnam wrong?" Skeeter replies, "Wrong? Man, how can it be wrong when that's the

way it is? These poor Benighted States just being themselves, right? . . . Nam the spot where our heavenly essence is pustulatin'. Man don't like Vietnam, he don't like America" (229-230). Though Rabbit enthusiastically agrees, he fails to see the distinction between Skeeter's "support" for the war and his own. For Skeeter, Vietnam "is the local hole. It is where the world is redoing itself. . . . It is where God is pushing through. He's coming, Chuck, and Babychuck, and Ladychuck, let Him in. Pull down, shoot to kill. The sun is burning through. The moon is turning red. The moon is a baby's head bright red between his momma's legs" (228). While Rabbit believes the war is necessary, America on the side of the right, Skeeter celebrates the war because it confirms his view of what America has always been—a place of racism and imperialism. The longer the US commits itself to Vietnam, the more chaos the war will create at home. Skeeter's stories of Vietnam horrify Nelson, but both Rabbit and Jill tell him that they must listen to Skeeter, Rabbit concluding, "We all got to deal with it somehow" (227). But none of them know how to handle it. Skeeter becomes "wild," so much so that Rabbit tells him that he is getting "carried away" with their readings and conversations (243). Jill's drug addiction worsens, and Rabbit turns to Peggy Fosnacht. With the three of them, emblems of three factions of America, unable to "deal with it," Rabbit's house, a synecdoche of the country, goes up in flames. As large as Skeeter looms over this middle-section of the novel, he slinks away at the end of his section, hiding in Rabbit's car and then has to beg Rabbit for money and a ride out of town. Quickly, Rabbit's prejudice and racism return as he fears that Skeeter might stick a gun or a knife in his back. Alluding to Jesus' betrayal, Rabbit hands Skeeter thirty dollars to help him get out of town and wonders if a "Judas kiss" would be appropriate (292). Here Updike juxtaposes two biblical figures

with Skeeter: Skeeter is both Judas, the betrayer, who receives the money for handing over Christ (Luke 22:3-6 and John 13:27 both explain that Satan entered Judas), and Jesus, whom Rabbit wonders if he should betray by turning him in. Rabbit's thirty dollars helps the two men escape responsibility for Jill's death; Boswell calls Jill the "white race's crucified martyr" (124). Critics have oft noted Rabbit and Skeeter's callous reactions to her death. Jill's mother calls Rabbit a monster, and Skeeter tells Rabbit to explain to Nelson that her death was no big deal since "there's a ton of cunt in the world" (*Redux* 292). Rabbit and Skeeter also argue over which one of them should feel guilty. When Rabbit asks, "How could you let her die?" Skeeter replies, "Man, you want to talk guilt, we got to go back hundreds of years" (291). Rabbit argues, "I wasn't there. But you were there last night." Skeeter, though, rationalizes that he "was severely disadvantaged" (291).

Rabbit wants Skeeter to take responsibility for his present actions while Skeeter demands that Rabbit take responsibility for the past. Since both refuse to acknowledge their own guilt, they both eschew blame for the tragedy. Skeeter's defense, though, has plausibility, as it was in fact white men who burned the house down, and Skeeter's fear of being lynched is a real fear based in history that Rabbit does not understand. Updike mitigates Skeeter's guilt, but does not absolve him of it, and thus resists excusing the violence and agents of chaos in the radical black movement as a reaction to historical injustice. Whatever Skeeter's affinity for violence, though, the novel indicates that it stems from white racism. Additionally, white characters complain about black crime, but the most violent and deadly act in the novel is committed by white suburbanites, an act for which police immediately suspect Skeeter. Nevertheless, one man is stuck in

America's past and the other stubbornly in its present, and together they cannot imagine its future. Skeeter, we learn in the subsequent novel, dies in a shootout with police sometime before the events of *Rabbit is Rich*, so his eventual demise has little narrative significance. Upon receiving the notification from an anonymous sender, Rabbit muses that that "part of him subject to Skeeter's spell had shriveled and been overlaid . . . with him dead Rabbit feels safer" (*Rabbit is Rich* 27). The results of Rabbit's encounter with Skeeter and Jill are not entirely ambivalent, but neither is there wholesale change in his views.

The uneasy resolution the novel offers is a proper tending of and attention to one's private garden while respecting others' rights to do the same. Rabbit's sister Mim tells him, "Why don't you tend your own garden instead of hopping around nibbling at other people's?" (321). Read as a larger comment on America, Mim's question cuts to the heart of America's own internal strife while the nation attempts to "nibble" at the problems around the world. Mim tells Rabbit that his domestic strife is because he "didn't tend it at all," and the advice appears equally applicable to the nation as a whole (321). Indeed, many of the novel's characters seek their gardens, a stable and loving family life, while also searching for a sense of themselves as individuals. Although Rabbit meets Jill, the rich-girl-turned-burned-out-hippie, through the lounge, Rabbit does not take her hippie philosophy and politics too seriously. Her utterances come off as contrived, more of a parroting of other's words than conveying a real understanding of what she believes. As Marshall Boswell notes, "it is her wealth, rather than any specific moral conviction, that inspires her to become a hippie" (98). Skeeter characterizes Jill as enacting her white guilt: "We're [blacks] the blood to wash her sins away, right? Clean.

Shit, that burns me. There's no dirt made that cunt won't swallow. With a smile on her face, right. Because she's clean" (105). Skeeter's hostility toward Jill stems from his recognition that she is in part motivated by white guilt and that her willingness to let him use her is an attempt to absolve herself of that guilt, as if the sins of history could so easily be washed away. Furthermore, like Rabbit, Skeeter does not take seriously the hippies' political stances: they mock "all laws" except for the "laws of bribery and protection" (241). Additionally, Rabbit sees these privileged northeastern white young people as more about sticking it to their parents, feeling guilty about being rich, and using the counterculture as a way to play at life—as he tells Jill. "Put another record on," Rabbit orders, and then says that she's just another rich kid "throwing rocks at cops protecting your daddy's loot" (145). He continues, "You've had it handed to you, sweet baby, that's why it's so dead" (145-146). Having inherited a Porsche from her late father, Jill fails to maintain it and provokes an outburst from Rabbit. "You dumb mutt," he declares, "It's just the waste" (235). Because she has had it handed to her, Jill fails to see the value in what other people have had to work to obtain and maintain. Thus, for her it is easy to destroy (or shit on as she says) what has been provided for her. In addition to being fraught with white guilt, Jill comes off as a naïve young girl who is more influenced by her father's death than anything else. She is passed from man to man, with each successive man becoming for her a father figure, whom she lets manipulate her. She first refers to Buchanan as her daddy and later both Skeeter and Rabbit use and dominate her. She tells Rabbit that "I feel you're a funny big teddy bear my Daddy has given me" (186). But Jill's search for her father is not a dismissal of her character. Instead, she longs for what some other characters in the novel long for—fulfillment through a stable and

loving family. Although wealthy, Jill characterizes life with her mother and stepfather as cold and materialistic; she believes her mother was adulterous before her father died. Additionally, she claims that all she wanted from her first boyfriend was his “mundane love,” but instead he hooked her on drugs (149). Soon after meeting Rabbit, she moves in and quickly assumes traditional wifely duties as she cooks and takes care of Nelson.

Similar to Jill, Janice parrots the latest sixties’ jargon, full of pop-psychology and self-improvement slogans. She also relies heavily on Stavros for her opinions and his advice. Janice’s newfound liberalism easily crumbles when she discovers that a black man is living in her house. After accusing Rabbit of racism, she uses a racial slur in demanding that Rabbit kick him out of the home. Nevertheless, Updike “largely applauds” (and so does Rabbit eventually) Janice for her adultery, for turning the tables on Rabbit and refusing to live a living death as her verbally abusive and sexless husband has (Boswell 91). Janice’s adultery does not result from a desire to escape domesticity *per se*, but rather to escape the lifeless garden that she and Rabbit now have. Janice, in fact, still longs for a loving marriage and family—she hopes to have it with an unwilling or incapable Stavros if not Rabbit—and blames Rabbit for his treatment of her, for making her feel worthless. An assertion of her value, Janice’s adultery, like Rabbit’s in *Run*, is her means to reclaim her individuality, and as Rabbit himself thinks, a way for her to bloom. Janice sins boldly and “earns her freedom by sinning” (Boswell 91). Additionally, Janice’s adultery is an attempt to shock Rabbit out of his doldrums, for she wants him to reclaim her from Stavros, and as she tells Rabbit, to fight for her. Stavros confirms nothing less to Rabbit, advising him that Janice wants “what every normal chick wants. To be Helen of Troy” (*Redux* 155). After their reconciliation, Rabbit, too,

recognizes this, as he harbors no ill-will toward Janice for her affair throughout the remainder of the tetralogy. In fact, he tells her that her affair made her a better person and more appealing to him.

Although the novel conveys that America must get its house in order, Rabbit and Janice's uneasy reunion portends that America's divisive problems will not be easily, if ever, resolved. As usual in Updike's fiction and especially in *Rabbit Angstrom*, resolutions are often incomplete and lack fulfillment. Rabbit admits to Mim that Skeeter taught him "that this country isn't perfect," although even this is mitigated as he "realizes that he doesn't believe it, any more than he believes at heart that he will die" (*Redux* 311). Rabbit also counters his father's diatribe against war protesters, saying, "Pop, all they're saying is that they want the killing to stop" (304). Both of these remarks, he senses, go against his deep-rooted beliefs, and later he maintains his support for the war. However, his enthusiasm for the war has waned. Lying in bed with Janice and exasperated over all that transpired, he asks her, "Do you think Vietnam will ever end?" (351). Rabbit's Vietnam position and the impulsive return of his racism (the fear that Skeeter would stab him) exemplify just how deeply nationalism and racism are interwoven into the fabric of American consciousness. Indeed, even Janice, who had called out Rabbit for his racism and regurgitates 1960s political correctness, recoils at the notion of Skeeter in the Angstrom home: "you've taken that darkie into the house along with that hippie," she chastises (189). The novel's uneasy resolution does not overshadow the novel's critique of the nationalism and racism embedded in Rabbit and much of white America, rather it suggests that the turmoil of the 1960s was a cathartic time in American history, a time when much of America's underlying fountain of problems and divisions

over the identity of the nation came to a head. Again, the word *redux* means restored, rejuvenated, and marks a resurgence, and in Updike's rendering Rabbit's resurgence results from a process of catharsis. Since Rabbit represents working-class white America, his restoration symbolizes the redemption of his class through the social and political catharsis brought on by the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. This resurgence, however, constitutes a potential reconfiguration of Rabbit's and his class's values that, having been unsettled, are now more attuned to problems of racism, government propaganda, and the benefits of sexual freedom and equality. As Richard Kearney argues, catharsis serves as a form of cultural therapy. Working through cultural myths, catharsis is used to remedy social and cultural unrest by acknowledging the destabilizing elements in society, but it is also used to reestablish social order and equilibrium. The cathartic myth resulted from a lack of practical solutions to the ancient society's problems, which have carried over into a more complex world of politics, racism, and economics. Updike becomes the literary shaman of the modern world, using the cathartic myth to suggest the hope of a regenerative America. The cathartic myth does not necessarily provide an answer to these conundrums but serves as a symbolic response at the cathartic level of imaginary plots, characters, and representations. What cannot be solved historically, in other words, can be resolved fictionally in terms of structural balance. Updike works through this mythic method as Jill is sacrificed as "the cost of the social fabric"—she is "Iphigenia" sacrificed so the "crew can go on"—and in Jill's case, the country (Boswell 124). For example, Jill is burned to death in the fire that destroys Rabbit's home. Her tragic death marks the climax of the novel, but also allows for the restoration of Rabbit and his estranged wife, Janice's, marriage. From a mythic

perspective, Jill's death is a necessary sacrifice, the cathartic mechanism through which renewal is possible.

Some fifteen years after *Redux*, Updike published an essay, "At War with My Skin," that was later edited and turned into the second chapter of his memoir *Self-Consciousness*. The last chapter of the memoir is written in the form of a letter to two of Updike's grandchildren both of whom are of mixed Northern European stock and "the pure black of West Africa" (*Self-Consciousness* 171). Jay Prosser notes that Updike addresses "in his memoir the other his fiction has forgotten" (590). In addition Prosser asserts that in the 1980s critics turned from Updike to Toni Morrison who, if read alongside Updike, "much more consciously" returns to "America's history, in which skin forms a crucial surface" (Prosser 590). Prosser concludes that Updike and Morrison, if read "to cross the mirrored relation of each other" might "also dramatize the racial encounter repressed in America's history" (590).⁴³ *Rabbit Redux*, I argue, foregrounds Updike's aforementioned text that shows how intricately skin is laced into identity, how much individuals attempt to escape the trappings of their own skin, and the legacy of skin that his grandchildren must deal with as the children of a white mother and black father. Indeed, Updike sees American history as writing and inscribing the skins of its characters. Denying that racism is a factor in the condition of 1960s blacks, Rabbit tells Skeeter to "forget your skin" (196). Skeeter counters that he'll "forget it when you forget it, right?" (196). For certain, Rabbit cannot ignore Skeeter's skin; he looks upon it and sees that "His [Skeeter's] skinny chest, naked, is stunning in its articulation: every muscle sharp in its attachment to the bone. Rabbit has never seen such a chest except on a crucifix," but Jill also describes Skeeter's skin as "scaly" from being so "bitter"

⁴³ See Chapter III on Toni Morrison.

(243,186). Again, Updike juxtaposes Jesus and Satan onto Skeeter, but also Skeeter's skin is formed from America's history. His skin resembles Christ's because his body, taut and muscular, has carried the burdens of his race while its serpent-like scales are produced from his bitterness. Chiseled and textured by racism, Skeeter's skin reminds Rabbit that his whiteness is not pure. Skeeter tells Rabbit, "We fascinate you white man. We are in your dreams. . . . We are all the good satisfied nature you put down in yourselves when you took that greedy mucky turn" (204).

In citing her motivation for writing her trilogy, Toni Morrison explains that she was redressing America's "national amnesia" regarding slavery and black history (Morrison, *Conversations* 257). Also, Morrison recognizes that the betrayal of blacks in the 1870s by the policies that ended Reconstruction was in fact a double indemnity. Indeed, the travesties of Reconstruction fuel the narratives of *Jazz* and *Paradise* as much as slavery does *Beloved*. In *Redux*, Skeeter cites 1876 as the "76 that hurt" and notes that "the South got slavery back at half the price, it got control of Congress by counting the black votes that couldn't be cast, the North got the cotton money it needed for capital, everybody got the fun shitting on the black man and then holding their noses" (*Redux* 202). Skeeter's powerful retelling of history serves as Updike's attempt to force America to recognize not only the original sin of slavery, but also the continuation of its sins even after slavery's abolition. Skeeter, in his over-the-top presentation, in his dynamic Jesus-Satan dichotomy, is called on to shock America out of its historical ignorance—and amnesia. Far from being absent from Updike's fiction, the consequences of skin as it relates to American identity are what *Rabbit Redux* relentlessly addresses.

Rabbit is Rich: “Running Out of Gas” or Second Wind?

Rabbit is Rich is Updike’s most decorated novel, winner of the literary triple crown, the 1981 Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. A few years after the novel’s publication, Donald Greiner noted the critical accolades, and Marshall Boswell, assessing the entire tetralogy, claims that in *Rich* Updike has never written better. The novel is, in fact, rich—rich in style and significantly longer than its predecessors. The humor is robust, so much so that it has been called both a comic novel and an “American romance” (qtd. in Greiner, *Novels* 88). The novel combines the spiritual angst of *Run* with the social commentary of *Redux*, effortlessly blending the themes of both. While funnier than either *Run* or *Redux* and less tragic—no young girl’s death underpins the novel, instead a birth—a tone of despair pervades its pages, the humor often dark and mocking of its protagonist: Rabbit is the big, dumb lug living off his wife’s inheritance and the deaths of others. At age forty-six, Rabbit still loves America, but he’s lost his fanaticism and is not as ready to jump to its defense, his political attitude more *que sera sera* than love it or leave it, a fatalism that has come to haunt him in this novel.

Shading the novel’s dark undertones is Rabbit’s near total surrender to the trappings of American society. In *Run*, his recognition that America’s consumerism is fraudulent ignites his longing to escape. In *Redux*, Rabbit’s bitterness and anger come from knowing he was coerced into returning to Janice and taking a monotonous job as a linotypist, and thus he uses his patriotism in part as a cover for his own failures. But in *Rich*, Rabbit truly enjoys the material comforts that consumerism provides. And he enjoys his membership to the Flying Eagle Country Club and his wealthy, suburban

friends. Indeed, he has a reverence for *Consumer Reports*, and his material goods and gold are sacred. Not surprisingly then, Nelson's wrecking of his father's Corona and later a convertible irreverently become for Rabbit distorted "tragedies" that darkly, and comically, mirror the human deaths of the previous novels—tragedies for Rabbit now involve his cars rather than people. By undermining the relative, superficial happiness of the novel's protagonist, Updike challenges the reader to notice Rabbit's instinctual sense that he and his nation are living on borrowed time and the greed and material wealth cannot fulfill the hole left by spiritual desolation. Continuing the paradox of *Redux*, *Rabbit is Rich* shows that the more Rabbit becomes immersed in American society and culture the less American he becomes. Rabbit, though, semi-consciously recognizes this conundrum, and so he clumsily investigates the young girl he believes is his illegitimate daughter by Ruth in attempt to find the proof of the trace of his authentic self, the product of his initial search for grace.

In rich, forty-six year old Rabbit Angstrom's rearview mirror, the 1960s fade into the foggy horizon. The turmoil of that decade has settled enough for Rabbit to feel safe and comfortable in 1979 while his fortunes have turned around. "Rabbit is rich," the narrator tells the reader, but qualifies this wealth (1). Rabbit is rich only in comparison to his working class roots and within the context of the blue-collar town of Brewer, PA (Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom*, xv). Hence, Updike presents an ironic title as Rabbit's wealth, like America's, is not quite as advertised. He and America are "running out of gas," and "the great American ride is ending" (1). Gas lines, fuel shortages, "truckers who can't get diesel shooting at their own trucks," dollars "going rotten," and Rabbit feeling death closing in on him at age 46 (1). Rabbit's hope at the end of *Redux* that America will

endure has proven correct for the moment, though the sky is figuratively falling as Skylab—the space station America was supposed to restore and refurbish—is about to crash through Earth’s atmosphere. The dead are stacking up: Rabbit’s parents, his father-in-law Fred Springer—the ardent Republican who “burst” when “Nixon left him nothing to say”—his former teachers, customers, “local celebrities like himself,” and even John Wayne (2-3). Although Rabbit senses that America is, like him, on the decline, he intends to cushion the fall with America’s goodies, its material comforts, before it all comes crashing down. In spite of the Sixties’ creed (espoused by Jill in *Redux*) of ego-less love (Boswell 95), Charlie Stavros believes people are more selfish than ever, that corporations have seized even more control; Exxon, Big Oil, OPEC, President Carter have all manufactured the energy crisis to consolidate further wealth and power. Updike, in fact, says that the energy crisis gave him the fulcrum from which to swing the themes of *Rabbit is Rich*. If the government and big business learned anything from the Sixties, the novel indicates, it was that they needed a firmer grip on the controls. And Rabbit is just fine with that. Regarding the energy crisis, Rabbit tells Stavros, “I don’t blame the oil companies. . . . It’s too big for them too. Mother Earth is drying up, is all” (5). Stavros replies, “Shit champ, you never blame anybody. . . . Skylab could fall on your head right now and you’d go down saying the government had done its best” (5). Indeed, the effects of the counterculture have faded. Rabbit has more or less forgotten Jill’s warnings against materialism, and Skeeter, who Rabbit felt had seen him “anew, as with X-Rays,” is now dead (27). He thinks of Skeeter as a “madman,” and now Rabbit sits safe and “snug in his sealed and well-assembled” Japanese car (27). His racial prejudice remains, albeit lacking the venom portrayed in *Redux*. News reports confirm the fading of the Sixties; Rabbit

reads the article about Skeeter's death. Running a commune in Philadelphia called Messiah Now Freedom Family, Skeeter dies in a shootout with police (the details of which are not clear), and an officer offers that "We don't come up against as many of these crazies as we used to" (26). Perhaps the only significant lingering effect the Sixties have had on Rabbit is his marriage. Janice has maintained the confidence and self-assurance she claimed as a result of her affair, and Rabbit's respect and attraction to her has never been stronger (though Updike characteristically qualifies and limits the extent). Janice's mother refers to them as lovebirds, and their sex life, once dormant, is at least alive, even if it is more or less forced, such as Rabbit having to imagine himself in a pornographic film. Rabbit confesses that the "decade past has taught her more than it has taught him" (124).

Further undermining his apparent happiness, Rabbit's sense of inevitable doom is colored by the doldrums of the Seventies and America's apparently declining strength: "Going down with all her lights blazing, the great ship America," Rabbit muses (272). During a dinner with his family and Stavros, Rabbit initiates a discussion about President Carter's infamous "malaise" speech (though, he in fact never says the word). Even the once-liberal Stavros says, "I thought it was pathetic. The man was right. I'm suffering from a crisis. In him" (86). Nelson's friend Melanie adds that she "thought it was sad . . . the way he said people for the first time think things are going to get worse instead of better" (86). Although Carter's speech to the nation is received negatively by both the characters and many in the American public, the President's warnings about America's sickness exemplify Rabbit's own malaise:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. . . . We are at a turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose. One is a path I've warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. (Carter).

Carter's attack on consumerism relies on romanticizing America's past, and the Christian Carter points toward America's transference of spiritual values to material ones as a major reason for America's decline. Carter uses the broader adjective *human*, but clearly the context implies that he is referring to American identity. Although Rabbit is at first surprised at Carter's perceived pessimism, the sense of fatalism continues to creep up on him. The knowledge that his material comforts and present wealth can't keep him from death begins to seep in as Nelson returns home from college and starts to crowd him. He responds to the discussion on Chappaquiddick that he "never understood what was so bad about" it; [Ted Kennedy] "'tried to get her out.' Water, flames, the tongues of God: a man is helpless" (92). Later he learns that Peggy Fossnacht is dying of breast cancer: "My God," he thinks, "Breast he had sucked. Poor old Peggy. Flicked away by God's fingernail. Life is too big for us, in the end" (417). The reminders are everywhere. While

America appears to be dying all around him, Rabbit seemingly takes comfort in his wealth rather than spirituality. Hearing the rain, Rabbit thinks it's "the last proof to him that God exists" (111). Rabbit refuses to go to church because he thinks the minister is "a fag," but Melanie tells him that the minister's radical sermon "was about how the rich have to go through a camel's eye" (139). Although she bungles the verse, Melanie hints at what Rabbit intrinsically feels but hopes to avoid. In a feeble attempt to outpace death, he has taken to jogging, a routine he sticks to only when Nelson returns. Janice expresses concern that at his age he might be overdoing it, but Rabbit replies,

"It's now or never," he tells her, the blood of fantasy rushing through his brain. "There's people out to get me. I can lie down now. Or fight."

"*Who's* out to get you?"

"You should know. You hatched him." (127)

Knowing that he will have to die to make space for his son, Rabbit is repulsed by Nelson and resents having to share his home and the Toyota dealership. Nelson has come to mean death for Rabbit; he wonders why the "the poor little shnook" has to stand so close to him as he hears "the boy's worried breath" (141). In a gratuitous scene, Rabbit and Janice have sex on top of Krugerrands he has bought, as if he can somehow generate more wealth in contrast to the son he has spawned who is now "out to get" him. Rabbit's selfishness exemplifies Stavros's assessment that the "little man" is out only for himself; he resists Nelson's pleas to join him in running the Toyota dealership despite Nelson's legitimate hereditary rights to his maternal grandfather's business. Rabbit's hesitancy in letting Nelson learn the business arises from a desire to keep Nelson from crowding him and to keep him from encroaching on what has been his territory. Since taking over after

his father-in-law's death, he has been "king of the lot" and "the man up front" (3). The work itself he holds little interest in: the "cars sell themselves, is his philosophy" (3). Really, though, Mrs. Springer still holds the lot, and Rabbit resents the prospect of being a placeholder for his son, who he knows will eventually inherit the business.

Monstrously, Rabbit gleefully watches his son flail and fail; after seeing Nelson wreck a convertible he hoped to sell at the lot, Rabbit feels "awkward blobs of joy bobbing in [his] chest. Oh what a feeling" –the last phrase a take on the popular Toyota slogan (152). "Within a week," Updike writes, "it has become a story he tells on himself" at the country club: "I had this terrible impulse to laugh, but the kid was in there crying" (128). Although Rabbit admits he pitied Nelson and that his son ended up being right about selling the convertibles for a profit, Rabbit wants to keep him at arm's length and tries to undermine Nelson's plan to leave college and share in the family business, which is Springer rather than Angstrom. Updike comments about Rabbit in *Rich* that Rabbit hopes to "reap advantage from American decline" while he can (*Rabbit Angstrom* xv). As the price of his gold tops out, Rabbit takes Webb Murkett's advice and goes to convert his gold to silver. Worried about speculating on the price, Rabbit fears that the resolution of the Iran hostage crisis will burst the silver market. Rabbit tries to maintain his position and wealth at the expense of others including his own son. For example, Rabbit dismisses Janice's light concern that buying Krugerrands will support apartheid in South Africa: "they're making jobs for the blacks, mining the stuff" (*Rich* 194). Certainly, Updike has not infused Rabbit with a new trait; naturalistically and spiritually, Updike sees selfishness as intrinsic to people in general (he rejects Jill's idea of ego-less love in *Redux*, [Boswell 95]).

In Updike, in fact, a certain degree of selfishness is necessary for the pursuit of happiness, as in Janice's need to put her needs in front of Nelson's in *Redux*. But Rabbit's selfishness in *Rich* differs from his selfishness in *Run*. In *Rich*, Rabbit's material lust and territorialism are not sins resulting from a search for grace; he does not sin boldly in these regards. In *Run*, the reader may empathize or sympathize with Rabbit over his predicament; in *Rich* such reactions are not likely. Nelson thinks that Rabbit "doesn't like to look bad anymore, that was one thing about him in the old days that you could admire, that he didn't care that much how he looked from the outside, what the neighbors thought. . . . [H]e could say Fuck You to people now and then. That spark is gone, leaving a big dead man on Nelson's chest" (284). Rabbit's selfishness tinges with greed as he hoards not only his gold but also his position at the lot. It also overtakes, temporarily, any paternal desire to see his son become better than himself; Janice calls him "an unnatural father" (63). In *Run*, Rabbit's run is toward grace, in search of the "thing behind everything"; in *Rich*, his run is away from grace—at least at first—as he has traded in the spiritual for the material (*Run* 241). In addition to his fascination with money, sex for Rabbit, which was once for him a spiritual undertaking with Ruth in *Run* and Jill in *Redux*, has been replaced with mere lust, juxtaposed with his love for money. Spreading his Krugerrands on the bed, Rabbit "feels amid the pure strangeness of the gold his prick firming up and stretching the fabric of his Jockey shorts" and while "examining the coin, stroking its subtle relief . . . He hasn't had a hard-on just blossom in his pants since he can't remember when" (194-195).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Critics have pointed out that this scene is reminiscent of a scene in Frank Norris's *McTeague*, a novel about greed.

Donald Greiner notes that Updike takes the reader deeper into Rabbit's head than he had done in the previous novels (*Novels* 91). And through this window into Rabbit's psyche Updike hints that Rabbit suspects his unsettled inner-self. Rabbit senses that he has lost *something* in exchange for material wealth. One of his first recognitions of this loss comes when he acknowledges that his interest in sex has waned: "Somewhere early in the Carter administration his interest, that had been pretty faithful, began to wobble and by now there is a real crisis of confidence. He blames it on money, on having enough at last, which has made him satisfied all over; also the money itself, relaxed in the bank gets smaller in real value all the time" (*Rich* 43). Updike ties Rabbit's loss of confidence to a president who is unable to recapture Americans' confidence in their country—Rabbit's malaise mirrors his nation's. In the midst of this discontent, "Rabbit senses a need for a quest," and *Rich* presents Rabbit several opportunities (Greiner, *Novels* 91). One possibility for an enticing quest rests in Rabbit's lust for Webb Murkett's twenty-nine-year-old wife, Cindy. Rabbit finds in her the tantalizing nymph that he's happy to pursue, but his pursuit is mere fantasy, and Rabbit knows it. His lust for her reaches a peak when he rummages through their bedroom and finds pictures the couple had taken of each other having sex. Recalling the proliferation of pornography in the 1970s, Updike has Rabbit fantasize about himself in a pornographic film with Webb and Cindy in a *ménage a trois* while his old rival Ronnie Harrison is relegated to manning the camera. Noted for breaching sexual taboos, Updike's writing in *Rich* mimics the explicit and graphic scenes of pornography, intimating the rise of the sex industry. Out jogging, Rabbit muses on the rise of casual sex and pornography: ". . . it was part of the culture, taken for granted, fuck-and-suck-movies they call them, right out in the open, you take

your date, Adult Films New Each Friday in the old Baghdad on upper Weiser where in Rabbit's day they used to go see Ronald Reagan being co-pilot against the Japs" (204). Although fantasies of Cindy awaken in Rabbit a hint of sexual mystery, they have all the substance of a pornographic film. Rabbit's infatuation with Cindy is comical and cannot be taken seriously and thus lacks the spiritual yearning of Rabbit's sexual escapade with Ruth. As Marshall Boswell argues, Rabbit's lust for Cindy rests on the economic status of her and her husband (147). As much as he wants to sleep with Cindy, he wants to be Webb Murkett, the wealthiest, most influential member of their clique. In the Caribbean with friends, Rabbit has a golden opportunity to fulfill his fantasy as he and his circle of friends from the Flying Eagle swap spouses. But Updike denies Rabbit the grail of his quest. Instead of Cindy, Thelma Harrison takes Rabbit's hand and leads him to the bungalow where she confesses that she insisted that she have him on the first night. Knowing that Rabbit is attracted to Cindy, she promises that the women have agreed that he can have Cindy the following evening. Nelson, however, spoils Rabbit's chance at Cindy, running out on his pregnant bride, Pru, and cutting the Angstrom's excursion to the Caribbean short. Updike contrasts Rabbit's lustful fanciful quest for Cindy with his actual sexual encounter with Thelma Harrison. With Cindy, Rabbit's consummation would have been merely the fulfillment of his lust.

Rabbit's sexual encounter with Thelma Harrison, though, reinvigorates him. What at first seems to Rabbit an unfortunate detour in his quest for Cindy is actually the right path that Rabbit needs to take. Matthew Wilson sees this encounter as another negative, unfulfilling sexual experience (5-6) while Paula Buck argues that this sexual encounter is a positive experience that frees Rabbit "to perform a conscious act of altruism" (163).

Marshall Boswell also recognizes the significance of this encounter, calling Thelma “another of Updike’s life-givers” (Boswell 182). Read as a counter to Rabbit’s adolescent obsession with Cindy, Rabbit’s sexual foray with Thelma restores spiritual meaning to sex. Additionally, Updike’s sexual descriptions in *Rich* point to the rise of pornography in American culture and links it to the overall deadening meaning of sex, the latter of which he first points to in *Redux* (“You have no juice, baby. You’re all sucked out and you’re just eighteen,” he tells Jill [*Redux* 146]). Again, Updike pushes the boundaries of sexual description as Rabbit and Thelma engage in explicit acts that allude to the pornographic fantasies Rabbit has had about Cindy. However, the sexual acts that Rabbit and Thelma perform emerge not from lust or simple gratification, but spontaneously, from Thelma’s secret love for Rabbit. The discovery that Thelma is to be his paramour for the evening rather than Cindy disappoints Rabbit at first as he hopes that he can “get through this” and that “maybe all she wants to do is talk.” However, Thelma “breaks upon him like the clatter of an earthquake” and after performing oral sex on him declares that “I’ve wanted to do that for so long” (374, 376). Thelma confesses to Rabbit that she adores him and after he sees that her love is sincere, Rabbit becomes more enthusiastic. “He didn’t expect” to be so “stirred” by her (373), and he thinks of her giving him oral sex as “Beautiful” (375). To show him how much she loves him, Thelma asks Rabbit to engage in sex acts with her that he has never experienced and later Rabbit reciprocates the offer. At first, Rabbit is concerned that he will not be able to maintain an erection, but her declaration of love increases his sexual stamina. Having anal sex with Thelma, Rabbit finds “no sensation: a void, a pure black box, a casket of perfect nothingness. He is in that void” (378). Although Matthew Wilson interprets this “nothingness” as an empty feeling,

it is the nothingness and void that Rabbit has been pushing up against that makes him feel alive. Afterward he tells Thelma, “Thank you. That I won’t forget” (378). Fascinated by Thelma’s affection for him, Rabbit asks her, “what is it about me that turns you on?” (378). Thelma replies:

Oh darling. Everything, Your height and the way you move, as if you’re still a skinny twenty-five. The way you never sit down anywhere without making sure there’s a way out. Your little provisional smile, like a little boy at some party where the bullies might get him the next minute . . . You believe in people. . . . You’re so grateful to be anywhere. . . . You’re so glad to be alive. . . . I love you *so much* for it. (379)

Rabbit then thinks of the

void, inside her. He can’t take his mind from what he has discovered, that nothingness seen by his single eye. In the shadows, while humid blue moonlight and the rustle of palms seep through the louvers by the bed, he trusts himself to her as if speaking in prayer, talks to her about himself as he has talked to none other: about Nelson and the grudge he bears the kid and the grudge the boy bears him, and about his daughter, the daughter he thinks he has, and grown and ignorant of him. He dares to confide to Thelma, because she has let him fuck her up the ass in proof of love, his sense of miracle at being himself, himself instead of somebody else, and his old inkling, now fading in the energy crunch, that there was something that wanted him to find it, that he was here on earth on a kind of assignment. (378)

Finally, their sexual encounter culminates in a particularly graphic scene in which Rabbit and Thelma take turns urinating on one another. Although these sex acts have the specter of a pornographic film, Updike has couched these acts in deep emotion, acts so unique to the two of them that they only heighten the intimacy. Updike artfully determines that the line between pornography and eroticism is not the in physical aspects alone but in the motivations behind them. With Cindy, the sex would have been spiritually meaningless; with Thelma they are acts of love. Far from “a negative revelation,” as Wilson puts it (M. Wilson 14), Rabbit and Thelma’s sex makes him “more in love with the world again” (*Rich* 390). Additionally, Wilson argues that Rabbit’s encounter with Thelma has no “reconnection to his past” (M. Wilson 14). However, he unloads about his past to Thelma, telling her about his dead daughter and the one he thinks is alive. Feeling in love with the world again, Rabbit quickly decides to confront Ruth about his suspicion that the young girl who came into the lot is in fact their daughter, conceived during the events of *Rabbit, Run* some twenty years earlier.

Virtually absent in *Rabbit Redux*, Ruth returns in *Rabbit is Rich*, as does the storyline that she may have been carrying Rabbit’s baby at the end of *Rabbit, Run*. Another quest option that distracts him from his materialism occurs early in the novel when a young couple comes into Springer Motors. Rabbit immediately senses something familiar in the girl as “he feels an unwitting swimming of her spirit toward his” (*Rich* 11). He wants to ask her, “*is your mother’s name Ruth?*” but hesitates “lest he frighten her, and destroy for himself the vibration of excitement, of possibility untested” (18). Despite his seeming comfort, Rabbit “needs the chase,” Greiner writes, and the possibility of a “daughter in exchange for a dead one would be a blessing from immortality” (Greiner,

Novels 91). In addition to needing the chase and to replacing his dead daughter for a live one, Rabbit also longs for his former, rebellious self, that “beautiful, brainless guy”—as Janice described him (*Redux* 63). The girl, as the product of his quest for grace, signifies the possibility of reaching out once more to his true self. Indeed, he makes a “mistake that married people make” by assuming that he and Janice are one and entrusting to her “this ghost of his alone,” telling her about the possibility of his illegitimate daughter (*Rich* 64). Janice refuses to discuss it, saying, “It’s a disgusting idea” (64). Janice, now comfortable, senses Rabbit’s curiosity about this girl as a threat to their stability. Rabbit, though, can’t let it alone and makes the first of his two excursions to rural Galilee where Ruth lives. As he meanders in overgrowth searching for her house, Rabbit thinks he “does not know if he loved her or not, but with her he had known love, had experienced that cloudy inflation of self which makes us infants again and tips each moment with a plain excited purpose, as these wands of grass about his knees are tipped with packets of their own fine seeds” (100). Rather than the inflation of markets where money loses value, a problem during the Carter years, the inflation of self Rabbit experienced during *Run* he hopes to relive or at the least revisit. Although during his first trip to Galilee Rabbit runs off, fearing he will be spotted, after his night with Thelma Rabbit is more determined. As he crosses onto what he suspects is Ruth’s property, his instinct is to run. However, “as with dying, there is a moment that must be pushed through, a slice of time more transparent than plate glass; it is in front of him and he takes the step, drawing heart from that loving void Thelma had confided to him” (396). As in *Run*, Ruth sees through to Rabbit’s innate egotism. Within moments of their reunion, she declares, “I’d forgotten what a pushy obnoxious bastard you are. Stuck on yourself from cradle to grave” (400).

She remarks that he's "dressed up like a pansy" in his suit and sheepskin hat (400). She cuts to the core and tells him that he is now "the kind of person you used to hate" and that he now belongs "with those phonies" in suburban Penn Park (401). But Rabbit has come on a sincere mission, and although she tears up at the sight of Rabbit as a "regular Brewer sharpie," the ever-perceptible Ruth senses that before her is the Rabbit she once knew (401). "She loves him," we are told, and their banter is playful at first—he on the offense, she on defense (400). Although Ruth denies that the girl, Annabelle, is Rabbit's daughter, Rabbit picks up on cues that suggest otherwise: the hints that the daughter is hers alone and not her late husband's. He departs without Ruth's confession, but in his confrontation Rabbit at least has attempted to recapture some essence of himself; symbolically he pops a Life Saver into his mouth as he leaves.

Along with Rabbit's inner conflict, his outer conflict with his son Nelson dominates another layer of the novel. Rabbit's conflict with his son suggests Rabbit's entropic view of American society: it is in decline, breaking down, and the next generation is losing something of the old in the transfer. Certainly, Nelson's characterization buttresses such an observation. As Stavros and Thelma point out, Nelson is in many ways much like his father. Nelson, Stavros observes, is not built for the car business and neither is Rabbit, who relies heavily on Stavros and is quite glad that the Toyotas seem to sell themselves. Thelma observes that Nelson's hang-gliding in Colorado sounds like Rabbit, hinting at Rabbit's love of pushing up against death. Like Rabbit, Nelson is irresponsible; he, too, will run out on his pregnant wife. But, as Donald Greiner notes, Nelson lacks Rabbit's "joyous pursuit" of grace (94). Nelson is indeed a "sourpussed little punk," a scowling, angry young man who has none of Rabbit's

“loveable” traits (*Rich* 79). Customers at the lot are turned off by him, and he does not possess Rabbit’s zest for life. Most of all, though, Nelson lacks belief: “I don’t believe any of that stuff,” he declares. “You don’t?” Rabbit replies, “hurt” (177). In further reply to Nelson’s professed atheism, Rabbit says that without a little religion, “you’ll sink” (178). Marshall Boswell argues that Nelson’s plotline is a rewrite of *Rabbit, Run*, and it seems that this is, indeed, the case (213). But Nelson is Rabbit without the faith in himself or without the sense of quest to find “the thing behind everything” (*Run* 241). If *Run* laments the decline in America’s faith with Rabbit as a lone, flawed saint marching on, *Rich* further highlights this decline as Nelson is not spiritually willing to carry on the quest of the father. With Nelson, God is dead. Rabbit tells him, “Look, Nelson. Maybe I haven’t done everything right in my life. I know I haven’t. but I haven’t committed the greatest sin. I haven’t laid down and died” (*Rich* 341). Unable to relate, Nelson replies “Who says that’s the greatest sin?” (344). Also disturbing to Rabbit is Nelson’s refusal to take the opportunity that Rabbit did not have. Despite the Pill, the legalization of abortion, and more liberal attitudes, Nelson is still getting crunched by social forces as they pressure him to marry the pregnant Pru. Recognizing that Nelson is about to repeat his own life, Rabbit tries to give Nelson options other than marriage. For the first time in the novel, Rabbit expresses a sincere desire to see his son have a better life than he. Rabbit explains to Nelson that

There’s something that doesn’t feel right to me in this new development.

The girl gets knocked up, O.K., it takes two to tango, you have some responsibility there, nobody can deny it. But then as I understand it she flat out refuses to get the abortion, when one of the good things that’s

come along in twenty years along with a lot that's not so good is you can go have an abortion right out in the open, in a hospital, safe, and clean as having your appendix out. (184)

Nelson replies that Pru refused the abortion because “it wasn’t natural;” Rabbit counters that because she refused the abortion “it’s sort of her funeral, isn’t it. . . . I mean where do you come in? Nelson Angstrom. I mean, what do *you* want?” (185). As he says this, he drives an underpass that reminds him of a “crypt, of death” and declares to his son that he does not “have to lead” his [Rabbit’s] life (185). Lacking Rabbit’s sense of grace, Nelson cannot relate to Rabbit’s attempt to help him escape the trap. Instead, Nelson interprets Rabbit’s offer as hostile, a way to deny him a place at Springer Motors. Rabbit’s empathy for his son in this passage clearly overshadows the selfish motivations for wanting his son away in other places in the text. He wants Nelson to be his own man, to embody the spirit of American individualism in a way that he never fully did. Essentially, Rabbit alludes to the struggles he faces throughout the tetralogy. Rabbit’s desire is to “go it alone, from sea to shining sea,” but the web of interdependency is proving too much to escape (422).

John Wayne—the definitive postwar cultural icon of male American rugged individualism—as Rabbit muses both at the beginning and end of the novel is, after all, dead. He wants to say “Fuck the Japs,” but earlier he acknowledges how much his family—and, thus, America—depends on the Japanese for jobs and products (422). In the background, again, is Carter’s speech that delineates America’s predicament:

It is the idea which founded our nation and has guided our development as a people. Confidence in the future has supported everything else: public institutions and private enterprise, our own families, and the very

Constitution of the United States. Confidence has defined our course and has served as a link between generations. We've always believed in something called progress. We've always had a faith that the days of our children would be better than our own. (Carter)

Despite the media's criticism of Carter's speech for its apparent pessimism, Carter outlined six points that he believed would restore American confidence. The President invoked a semblance of the go-at-it-alone sentiment by announcing that America would decrease its dependency on foreign countries for energy. The President also invoked America's past: just as America won World War II, America would win the energy war. Indeed, the coda of Carter's speech was intended to announce how America would return to what it once was. Additionally, the President appeals to both America's sense of roguish pride and the need for citizens to participate in government (he laments the low numbers of voter turnout). Carter's forward-looking policies and appeals to American pride fail to resonate. Rabbit thinks Carter "is smart as a whip and prays a great deal but his gift seems to be the old Eisenhower one of keeping much from happening, just a little daily seepage" (*Rich* 113). Rabbit sees Carter's ineptitude hitting a low point with the hostage crisis: "Khomeini and Carter are both trapped by a pack of kids who need a shave and don't know shit, they talk about old men sending young men off to war, if you could get the idiotic kids out of the world it might settle down to be a sensible place" (321). John Wayne's nation is now a country brought to its knees by "a pack of kids" (243). Even Stavros laments America's lack of vigor: "This country is sad, everybody can push us around" (243). When Rabbit replies, "You were the guy who wanted to get out of Vietnam," Stavros remarks, "That was sad too" (243). Resenting

Nelson and his generation, Rabbit pleads to Ma Springer and Janice not to let Nelson in at the Toyota dealership: “Take over young America. Eat me up. But one thing at a time” (109).

Consistent with the previous two novels, the ending of *Rabbit is Rich* is ambiguous, and even more so than the previous two, hints toward an additional sequel. With the birth of a granddaughter and the new daughter-in-law, the two dead girls from Rabbit’s past are replaced. Although the younger, female additions to his family suggest renewal, the last lines of the novel present the birth of his granddaughter ambivalently:

Oblong cocooned little visitor, the baby shows her profile blindly in the shuddering flashes of color jerking from the Sony, the tiny stitchless seam of the closed eyelid aslant, lips bubbled forward beneath the whorled nose as if in delicate disdain, she knows she’s good. You can feel in the curve of the cranium she’s feminine, that shows from the first day. Through all this she has pushed to be here, in his lap, his hands, a real presence hardly weighing anything but alive. Fortune’s hostage, heart’s desire, a granddaughter. His. Another nail in his coffin. His. (423)

If in Rabbit’s eyes Nelson and his generation are pushing America toward failure, then hope lies in the promise of even future generations. However, all Rabbit can be sure of is that this granddaughter is alive, though she will be “hostage” to some unknown fortune that Nelson will leave her, just as Nelson has been left with the legacies of Rabbit’s generation. However, as these novels proceed, and as the reader would be aware, irony belies the nostalgia for Rabbit’s America. In Rabbit’s rearview mirror, the myth of the American ideal glows, blurring the nation’s future. The conflict that has underpinned

Rabbit's struggles in this novel has been a conflict over Rabbit's materialism and his inner faith in himself—it is the crisis that Carter poses in his speech. America needs faith in itself, Carter implores, rather than a blind lust for material goods. Toward the end of *Self-Consciousness*, Updike touches precisely on this conflict: “. . . when we try in good faith to believe in materialism, in the exclusive reality of the physical, we are asking ourselves to step aside, we are disavowing the very realm of emotion, and conscience, of memory and intention, and sensation” (264). If the novel is indeed the happiest of the four novels, the optimism lies in Rabbit's own recognition, however faint and however clumsily manifest, that his individuality, his self, lies beneath the layers of culture that overlay him.

Rabbit at Rest: Rabbit and Reagan, Dream Men

In *Rabbit at Rest* (1990), the fifty-six year old Rabbit Angstrom is semi-retired, lives half the time in Florida and the other half in Pennsylvania, suffers from heart problems, and finds out that his son Nelson, married to Pru with two children, is a drug addict. To make matters worse, Nelson has been embezzling money from the Toyota dealership to pay for his drug habit and experimental medication, he claims, for his AIDS-plagued friend, Lyle. Rabbit and Janice force Nelson into rehab but must figure out a way to repay Toyota the \$200,000 that Nelson stole. After a heart attack, Rabbit recuperates while Janice begins a new career in real estate. In the midst of the turmoil, Rabbit and Pru sleep together, prompting Rabbit to flee to Florida to avoid the family's reaction. While in Florida, he dies from a heart attack he suffered while playing basketball, bringing the tetralogy to a close.

Rabbit Angstrom “is the New World’s man, armored against eventualities in little but his selfhood,” Updike tells us in his introduction to *Rabbit at Rest* (Updike, *Rabbit Angstrom*, xix). Perhaps this is what makes Updike’s Rabbit tetralogy so defiantly American, that it so meticulously records a character’s resistance to the dissolution of the self amid an ever expanding ocean of social, cultural, and political tides. Peter Bailey refers to *Rabbit Angstrom* as “a fifteen-hundred page elegy to American individualism” (15) and indeed the last eighty pages of *Rest*—as Rabbit marches stoically to his death—catalogue mostly nostalgically the sights, sounds, and events of his life as a kind of homage to the American past. But *Rest* is more than just a lamentation on the end of American individualism as embodied by Rabbit Angstrom. If anything, *Rest* resists celebration of individualism but instead further probes the tension between individual freedom and the need for stable families and communities. As the tetralogy has played out, Rabbit’s life exemplifies mostly conformity rather than individuality. Though the novels build toward episodes of Rabbit’s consequential transgressions, Rabbit, except in *Run*, spends most of these pages as someone more than willing to play it safe as a company man and willing to believe that the government “had done its best,” as Stavros mocked, in looking out for him and his country (*Rich* 5). Significantly, *Rabbit at Rest* returns more forcefully to the issues of race and ethnicity that are largely relegated to the tangential in *Rabbit is Rich* in favor of a more focused look into Rabbit’s inner thoughts and his conflict with Nelson. As Rabbit has had to split more of his time between Pennsylvania and Florida and as younger generations have begun to take over more of American culture, Rabbit is forced to deal more and more with an America he has heretofore been mostly unfamiliar with: his Jewish golfing buddies, working women, a

gay employee, and the world of drugs Nelson brings into the family. Culminating in Rabbit's preference to die alone rather than feel "the squeeze" of his family, *Rabbit at Rest* dramatizes Rabbit's last quest to maintain a semblance of his individuality in a culture that is smothering him beneath its weight (405). However, Updike is not necessarily championing Rabbit's quest in this final installment. This is not a cheering of Rabbit's "go-at-it-alone" strategy. Rather, in *Rest*, Rabbit's death makes room for a new kind of America. Although the novel betrays a nostalgia and reverence for Rabbit's era, Rabbit's death at a relatively young age (56) hints that the novel also welcomes the inevitable change that the country undergoes and acknowledges that America may yet resurge through its plurality.

The figure of President Ronald Reagan looms over the novel, the muse of Rabbit's nostalgia and reverence for his country. The novel takes place from December 1988 to September 1989. Reagan is no longer in office, and Rabbit is not impressed with his successor, George H.W. Bush. As Rabbit begins what more than one critic has alluded to as a slow suicide, nostalgia dominates his thoughts, as much as sex dominates them in *Rich*. Rabbit's nostalgia carries with it a great irony, since Rabbit's past encompasses great personal tragedies but also the trials and tribulations of his country, including Rabbit's impressions of phonies and fraud that characterize American society. In *Rest*, Rabbit has come to revere the period and lament the end of the Cold War. He admits that he misses it: "it gave you a reason to get up in the morning," and he later thinks, "without the cold war, what's the point of being an American?" (320). Accompanying the end of the Cold War is the end of Reagan's presidency, a presidency awash in nostalgic propaganda and determined to build America into an incomparable

military juggernaut. Indeed, one of the primary missions of the Reagan administration was to erase the haunting aura of America's failure in Vietnam by rebuilding the American military and making it more technologically advanced. Counteracting Soviet aggression and expansionism against Afghanistan, Reagan sought to exert American power against communism in Central America and the Caribbean. If the end of the Vietnam War had caused Ford's and Carter's hesitancy to act militarily, Reagan and a reinvigorated conservative movement had no such qualms. For Rabbit, Reagan exhibited the qualities of stronger presidents he had known in his youth: Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy—World War II heroes and Cold War warriors unapologetic about America's might. These presidents contrast greatly with the seemingly weaker presidents of Rabbit's later years: Johnson and his failures in Vietnam, Nixon and his dirty tricks, Ford and his brief, uninspired tenure, Carter and his inability to get hold of the energy and hostage crises. Alone among the men in his golfing group, of whom the other three are Jewish, Rabbit liked Reagan. The world, Rabbit muses, "became a better place under him. The Communists fell apart, except for in Nicaragua, and even there he put them on the defensive. The guy had a magic touch. He was a dream man" (55). In *Rich*, Rabbit recalls the World War II propaganda film in which movie actor Reagan fought "against the Japs," and now Reagan has returned to his consciousness as the dream-magic man leading America against the Soviets (268). Rabbit eventually conflates Reagan with God: "Harry misses Reagan slightly, at least he was dignified, and had that dream distance; the powerful thing about him as President was that you never knew how much he knew, nothing or everything, he was like God that way, you had to do a lot of it yourself" (268). As in *Redux*, Updike's narrative derides Rabbit and his religious awe of

America's leaders, although in *Rest* this awe is limited to Reagan—as Bush seems weaker and transparent to Rabbit. Rabbit's Jewish golfing pals are Democrats and have a realistic perception of Reagan and the US in general. Somewhat ashamed of his reverence for Reaganism, Rabbit dares not disclose to them that he voted for Bush in the 1988 election. Imparting some realism in contrast to Rabbit's dreamy view of America, Rabbit's golfing partner Bernie Drechsel tells the group that the difference between Bush and Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis was that

Dukakis tried to talk intelligently to the American people and we aren't ready for it. Bush talked to us like we were a bunch of morons and we ate it up. Can you imagine, the Pledge of Allegiance, read my lips—can you imagine such crap in this day and age? Ailes⁴⁵ and those others, they made him into a beer commercial—head for the mountains. (54)

Rabbit, of course, is part of the electorate who was mesmerized by Bush's slogan driven campaign. Nevertheless, for all of Rabbit's nostalgia, he senses Reagan's vacuity underneath the charm. A continuation of the 1970s decline, in the 80s "Everything is falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God" (6). Rabbit characterizes Reagan's administration as "like anesthesia," and in this dreamy haze he prefers to think of America, particulars be damned (55). Indeed, the opening of the novel casts Rabbit as a kind of Walter Mitty, driving too fast as his wife chides him, while lost in a daze of fantasy and mind wanderings. But Rabbit does not share Mitty's heroic daydreams; he thinks of planes crashing and exploding in midair, like the tragic Pan Am flight blown up

⁴⁵ Roger Ailes, a political consultant to George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign, now chairman of Fox Television.

over Lockerbie, Scotland a few days before the novel begins.⁴⁶ With Bush, Rabbit senses a great step down in American power from Reagan, which mirrors his own declining health. There is something about Bush that Rabbit does not trust; he does not carry for Rabbit the God-like aura of Reagan. He tells his employee Elvira: “Do you ever get the feeling . . . now that Bush is in, that we’re kind of on the sidelines, that we’re sort of like a big Canada, and what we do doesn’t much matter to anybody else?” (324). Although *Rest*’s composition and publication came before the Persian Gulf War, it is doubtful that Rabbit would have been impressed by Bush’s invasion of a third-rate power such as Iraq, which was even further diminished by its costly decade-long war with Iran. Regardless, Updike uses the Bush presidency as a sign of—if not further decline—uncertainty. Reagan, in Rabbit’s mind, had vanquished the Soviet Union without firing a shot, and now with the great enemy gone the point of American power seems elusive. He completes his thought to Elvira, “It’s kind of a relief, I guess, not to be the big cheese,” but Rabbit really does not believe it (324). For Rabbit’s generation, victory in World War II infused the US with moral and political capital that, as the tetralogy documents, were spent recklessly in America’s postwar failures at home and in the jungles of Vietnam. Rabbit’s nostalgia, thus, rests in the ideal that America never attained, but through Reagan, Rabbit had sensed the recapture of America’s former glory. In *The Age of Reagan*, historian Sean Wilentz argues that the “Reaganite myth” is actually two-pronged: One prong consisted of the nostalgia for “close-knit families and neighbors,” a “simpler America” straight out of a Frank Capra film where neighbors help neighbors—“a land before a time of ghetto riots, flag-burners” (Wilentz 135). Where trouble “reared its head in the Reaganite homeland . . . decent Americans always rallied ‘round, and by

⁴⁶ The novel begins December 28, 1988. The Lockerbie jet blew up on December 21, 1988.

the grace of God, defeated the villains' plots" (135). Certainly, this prong of the Reaganite myth invoked the perceptions of the 1950s despite the underappreciated undercurrents of civil unrest during this decade. The other prong, Wilentz proposes, "stood in paradoxical relation with a decidedly unparadisaical element" of the first: "the legend of the rugged, competitive individual," the "lone cowboy," and the "hardworking entrepreneur who takes risks and, living by the inexorable market laws of supply and demand, either fails the test or makes a fortune" (135). Although Wilentz does not attempt to account for this paradox, Reagan's political journey from ardent Roosevelt Democrat to the definitive icon of Republican conservatism offers clues—and, more importantly for my purposes, hints at one of the major struggles that underlies the Rabbit tetralogy and is ultimately played out in the conclusion to *Rabbit at Rest*.

Wilentz, wisely, does not attribute the dreamy, nostalgic myth exclusively to Reagan—the innocent, benign community and the rugged individual myths are not only Reagan's. In fact, Carter's speech from which I quote in the *Rich* section specifically plays to these tropes and even laments the loss of "close-knit" communities from some idyllic American past (Wilentz 135). Nevertheless, Reagan hitched his wagon to these myths perhaps more tightly and certainly more successfully than both Carter and later George H.W. Bush, and Updike certainly picks up on Reagan's infectious and effective use of these tropes. In fact, Reagan so much *believed* in these myths—to a point that those within his circle found unnerving—that certain aspects of his policies attempted to reconcile these paradoxical elements (138). For example, Reagan's passion for deregulation had at one end the idea that the government was too intrusive and encroaching on the individual freedom of entrepreneurs, but Reagan also believed that

government was just as destructive to communities as it was to the individual.

Government men were bureaucratic outsiders who interfered in the affairs of local communities, disrupting the town hall decision-making process that did not need their stamp of approval—otherwise, the process would resemble Soviet-style governance.

Furthermore, Reagan’s slashing of social programs for the poor was in part a reflection of his belief that social programs created government dependents—cynically represented by Reagan’s image of the welfare queen and, in line with certain interpretations of the Moynihan Report, also destroyed communities (Wilentz 180). Reagan’s ideal was to provide “individual freedom” in the hopes that it would foster willful communities brought together by shared economic interests of supply and demand—or as a byproduct of supply-side economics. Rabbit’s sense that during the Reagan years “you had to do a lot of it yourself,” then is certainly an accurate representation of how many Americans felt about his policies—for better or for worse. However, as opposed to even more extreme conservatives or libertarians for that matter, Reagan held firm to that strain of Roosevelt Democrat concern for communities—regardless whether or not his policies seemed to suggest otherwise. As Gary Wills explains, Reagan felt more at home with domestic policy than any president since Roosevelt (344). Reagan *believed* his policies would work for all Americans. Reagan’s remark “that the function of government is not to confer happiness on us, but to give us the opportunity to work out happiness for ourselves” (Wilentz 136) is similar to Updike’s assertion that government should “guarantee the individual maximum freedom within a social frame of minimal laws [to ensure] — if not happiness — its hopeful pursuit” (Updike, Interview, *NPR*). Updike, though, was critical of Reagan-Bush tax policies, calling for a progressive tax that

lessened the gap between the rich and the poor (Updike, *More Matter*, 14). Further, Updike cites vast economic inequality as a roadblock to freedom rather than as evidence of it. As his decidedly Democratic political alliance indicates, Updike never viewed government as an inherent enemy of freedom and individualism, but rather a potential protector of both—if used responsibly. Updike adds that there cannot be freedom without equality, the latter of which, he intimates, must be brought about through government action. The abuse of the American system under Reagan-Bush, Updike argues, is a culmination of a gradual confiscation of wealth by the few. For Updike, the Reagan-Bush policies had clearly been manipulative, an abuse of government rather than a restriction of it—as it had been advertised. In his speech, Updike chooses his dates strategically, correlating 1929 to 1989. Indeed, in *Rest*, Rabbit tells Nelson that another Depression is looming. Despite whatever hopes Reagan may have had for American communities, his administration’s intentional refusal to enforce civil rights laws, attempts to roll back civil rights legislation, and demonizing of social programs certainly obfuscated for many any chance that Reagan’s domestic program was in any way uniting or was interested in strengthening communities. Second, his deregulatory campaign led to infamous incidents of vulture capitalism, which further underscored the “individualist” prong of the Reagan myth.⁴⁷ In terms of Reagan’s legacy, the individualist prong is what has endeared him to conservative Republicans and stoked the ire of Democrats and other Reagan critics.

For certain, Rabbit prefers Reagan’s go-at-it-alone-gunslinger image to Reagan’s Capra-esque America. After all, he had fled from the trappings of the latter in *Run*. As the tetralogy has documented, America’s gradual spiritual decline in white Protestant middle-class America exacerbated the gradual disconnect between individual happiness and

⁴⁷ The savings and loan scandal, for example.

community well-being. Since the white middle-class dominated the electorate, its spiritual decline,⁴⁸ Updike attempts to show, correlates to the crumbling of the collective outlook that once anchored many American communities. By 1984, white middle-class Americans had deserted in droves the collective narrative of the Democratic Party—which had won eight of twelve presidential elections between 1932 and 1976—losing two of these to the moderate and war hero Eisenhower. The Reagan Revolution, as conservatives enthusiastically refer to it, so effectively combined elements of Roosevelt’s and Kennedy’s optimistic rhetoric that swaths of blue-collar white voters, many of them normally Democrats, were attracted to the Reagan image and message (Wilentz 1). Although critical of Reagan, Updike chooses the Reagan aura to hover God-like over *Rest* because Reagan radically attempted to reconcile politically what Updike sees as the irresolvable tension of American society. By undoing and undermining years of regulatory legislation, Reagan attempted to unfetter the individual economically, and the individual in turn would invest in community growth. More abstractly, this played to notions of harmony between unrestricted individuals and their relationship to the American dream. Reagan’s failure to balance financial deregulation, a vast military build-up, domestic spending cuts, the budget, and investment in America’s crumbling cities were a disappointment of his presidency. In *Rest*, Updike portrays this as an aesthetic failure as much as a political failure of the Reagan dream to reconcile such incongruent elements. As Toyota district manager Mr. Shimada points out, America is having trouble

⁴⁸In terms of spiritual decline, certainly Updike is not referring to a lack of religion in America. The spiritual decline that Updike is referring to throughout his oeuvre is bound in the traditional, humble, and unpretentious Protestant denominations that communities were built around. This is contrasted to the bombastic, hyper-political, and surging religious right evangelical movements that coalesced in the 1980s. Updike’s 1995 novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies* discusses aspects of the rise of cultism and religious fanaticism.

figuring out the right balance between “order and freedom,” and the “needs of outer world and the needs of inner being” (*Rest* 356). To Mr. Shimada, whose company is the victim of Nelson’s financial fraud, America has too much emphasis on freedom at the cost of the community: “Everybody [in America] mention freedom. . . . Everywhere, dog shit, dogs must have important freedom to shit everywhere. Dog freedom more important than crean [*sic*] grass and cement pavement. . . . Too much disorder. Too much dog shit” (356). Mr. Shimada criticizes America for protecting trivial freedoms—or freedoms at any cost. Such trivial freedoms include too much fun at the cost of family and community. He lays Nelson’s crimes at Rabbit’s feet: “Who is father and mother of such son? Where are they? In Frorida [*sic*], enjoying sunshine and tennis, while young boy prays [*sic*] with games and autos” (356). Nelson, who embodies a reckless, drug-obsessed America, has not only repeated many of Rabbit’s mistakes but has underscored the repetitions with greater collateral damage. Nelson, at first, insists his drug use is recreational, but soon his recreational use is revealed to be a full-blown addiction, resulting in his assault against Pru, his wife, and the fraud that brings down the Springer Toyota dealership. Macrocosmically, Nelson’s generation, interested in self-absorbed recreation rather than work, shares the responsibility of America’s falling behind countries such as Japan, symbolized by the loss of Springer Motors to Japanese financiers. Nelson’s attitude toward economic success epitomizes the get-rich (or get-richer) schemes and philosophy through aggressive financial speculation that exemplifies the darker aspects of the financial industry in the Reagan era. Mr. Shimada complains that America wants to lower taxes and “do acquisitions and mergers” rather than build or create (356). Nelson tells Rabbit that in America being successful is just being lucky and

money just flows. Not much angers Rabbit more about Nelson than his flippant attitude toward money and his belief that the \$200,000 he owes and will have to borrow from his parents is not “in this day and age, an awful lot of money” (368). For Nelson, the money does just flow, since he steals it from the company and has no remorse about Janice and Rabbit having to pay the bill through the sale of their property. Although he lives in a house with no mortgage since he inherited it, Nelson is inexplicably angry that he has to pay the property tax on it. In *Rich*, he had claimed that money is shit, and this attitude has carried over to *Rest*. However, Nelson sees money as a means to an easy end: to get what you do not need, and to get it now. Since he thinks of money as lacking intrinsic value, he justifies wasting it. Thus, Updike draws a contrast between two extremes: Nelson, the prodigal son who wastes, and Rabbit, the miser father of *Rich* who hoards his gold. Nelson feels about his debt the way that Rabbit imagines the country feels about the national debt: “the government owes trillions and nobody cares” (361). Rabbit’s resentment that “no one has to *pay*—not Mexico or Brazil, the S and L banks, not Nelson,” is incongruous with his reverence for Reagan, who he senses is not “minding the store” and who himself admitted that the national debt was one of the great regrets of his presidency (6).

The incongruity in Rabbit’s reverence for Reagan and his sense that the nation is falling apart is further exemplified by Rabbit’s admonishment of Nelson’s actions and Rabbit’s own selfishness. Although Nelson’s drug use and its consequences dominate much of the novel, Updike has Rabbit commit another monstrously selfish act—as Janice describes it—that trumps his son’s actions. Feeling weakened by his heart trouble and resentful of Janice’s attempt to become a real estate agent—coupled with his troubled

relationship with Nelson—Rabbit sleeps with Pru while Janice is in class and Nelson is away in rehab. Revenge against Nelson motivates Pru as well as Janice’s attempt to take control of Nelson and her family. Later, Rabbit and Pru’s lovemaking becomes the trump card that Pru plays on Janice to keep Janice from enacting her plan to move them all into one house together. But for Rabbit, the sexual encounter means something more than just revenge on Nelson and Janice. Janice and Nelson have formed a camp against Rabbit, to keep him in the dark about their plans to get Nelson out of debt and transform Springer Motors. Consequently, Rabbit feels useless, and his feelings are further exacerbated by Janice’s neglect of him in favor of her career. Throughout the tetralogy, transgressive sex serves as a reinvigorating force for Rabbit, and in *Rest*, Rabbit’s final transgression is sleeping with his daughter-in-law. “Paradise blundered upon, incredible,” Rabbit thinks (314). This will be his last monumentally sinful act, one that makes him feel more alive. When confronted by Janice, Rabbit asks rhetorically, “Whajou think, I was dead already?” (393). An assertion of his self, his freedom, and his life, Rabbit’s incestuous iniquity comes at great cost to his family, recalling the time that he had told Ruth in *Run*: “if you have the guts to be yourself . . . other people’ll pay your price” (*Rabbit, Run* 129). “He wants, he wants,” Rabbit complains about Nelson, and as much as the lives of the father and son resemble one another’s, the reader should realize that Rabbit is also unconsciously referring to himself, or at least to the appetite of ego (*Rest* 222). That paradise is *blundered* upon, attained through sin, reinforces Updike’s theological view that sin is necessary for individual freedom, but always at someone else’s cost. Rabbit’s insatiable ego comes at Janice’s expense—her attempt to better herself Rabbit can see only as another abandonment of him, a replay of her desertion of him in *Redux*.

Throughout the novel, the four main characters—Rabbit, Nelson, Pru, and Janice—act with such self-interest that their family has split into factions: Nelson and Janice on one end, and with Rabbit and Pru briefly aligned, until Pru tells Janice and Nelson about her and Rabbit, leaving Rabbit alone. Janice’s selfishness manifests toward the end of the novel where her career and financial interests take precedent over Rabbit’s life. Peter Bailey notes that Updike hints early in the novel that Janice’s neglect of Rabbit contributes to his death, making her culpable in his demise (180). Updike makes this point more vividly when Janice thinks that Rabbit’s death will help her real estate career (Bailey 181). But in the Updike universe, Janice is no guiltier than Rabbit has been; her quest for her own freedom, like his, comes at a cost—and the cost is her husband.

Although Updike largely approved of Janice’s affair in *Redux*, here he is harsher as Janice’s quest for freedom is largely financially motivated rather than resulting in the mind-body restoration she achieved through her affair with Stavros. With subtlety, Updike gives Janice a type of job in an industry that the narrative criticizes as part of America’s decline: real-estate. Janice’s plan to flip properties for profit epitomizes Mr. Shimada’s critique that American business is no longer centered on building, but rather ping-ponging the same product back and forth at increasing prices—the “acquisitions and mergers” that Mr. Shimada decries. Indeed, Janice attempts to take on Nelson’s problems—from which she and Nelson gleefully believe they will profit—while Pru and Rabbit become further alienated from their respective marriages. Literally, Pru stops Janice’s attempt to merge everyone under the same roof by revealing her tryst with Rabbit. Although Updike is sympathetic toward Janice’s attempts to improve herself—she basically tells Nelson that women cannot sacrifice their own egos for the sake of

men—the prospect of profiting and gaining her freedom from Rabbit through his death makes her as guilty and self-serving as her husband. The novel concludes with a repetition of how the tetralogy began—Rabbit fleeing from Janice and Nelson. Feeling a “set-up” from his family, Rabbit sets out on a drive to Florida rather than face the fallout from his one night stand with Pru (437).

Rabbit’s flight south is awash in nostalgia, a fitting ending to the tetralogy, as it begins the way it ends. Rabbit’s Celica is Huck’s raft sailing southward on the Mississippi River, the Pequod launching from Nantucket, Dean and Sal palling around North America, the road narrative once again playing out in American fiction. The chronotope of the road may function as the iconic American trope, but while Dean’s road goes on forever, Rabbit’s always circles back. True, Rabbit never returns to Pennsylvania because he dies, but he phones home twice hoping Janice will give in and either beg him to return or join him in Florida. Before he gets to the Florida condo, though, Rabbit flips through channels on the radio, searching for the oldies stations in hopes of hearing the songs of his youth. As part of the dramatic irony, the reader knows that Rabbit deludes himself; his past was never as great as he wants himself to believe. With him is the American Revolution history book, Barbara Tuchman’s *The First Salute*, which he’s been mildly trying to finish. Getting out of range, he turns off the radio in disgust when all he can find are news stations filled with current events. He thinks he remembers “when the bottom fell out” of America (419). He had been “reared in a world where war was not strange but change was” (419). For Rabbit, America began to go downhill when Kroll’s, Brewer’s old-fashioned department store, closed “because the downtown had become too frightening for white people. . . . If Kroll’s could go, the courthouse could go,

the banks could go. When the money stopped, they could close down God himself” (419).

On his trip south Rabbit has been visiting Reaganland—America’s Disney-esque past⁴⁹—but the sight of the real Disney World spurs his recognition of the fraud—just as watching the Mickey Mouse Club and Jimmie the Mousketeer did thirty years before. Soon Rabbit will feel the pull of the more authentic America, one that he has been both frightened and fascinated by. After arriving in Florida, Rabbit wanders into the parts of Deleon, FL where tourists fear to tread. He finds neighborhoods that remind him of “the town of his childhood, Mt. Judge in the days of Depression and distant war;” he finds the black neighborhoods, “a vast stagnant economic marsh left over from Deleon’s Southern past,” that supply the “the hotels and condos with labor” (*Rest* 434). The blocks “feel like a vast secret” among the “glitzy community of elderly refugees” (434-435). He returns to this section of town: It is “the widespread black section that draws him back” because it “is in some way familiar, he’s been there before, before his life got too soft” (442). Ridding himself of Reaganesque nostalgia, Rabbit, though he often felt threatened by the racial and ethnic other, melds into the world of a more recognizable and real America. The “other” ceases to be as he identifies the blue collar neighborhood of Deleon with that of his own childhood—his real one, not the safe, unchanging memory of Kroll’s department store and its white-only downtown, but the “mysterious” passageways of Mt. Judge (442). Deleon is the America Rabbit grew up in, working people living in “glorified cabins put up after the war for people without much capital who yet wanted a piece of the sun,”—and where boys play basketball (442). After interrupting a game

⁴⁹ Wills argues that “Disneyland presents America’s favored version of history . . . the version accepted by Reagan” (375).

previously (as he did at the beginning of the tetralogy), Rabbit plays his final game against a black kid the narrator names Tiger, for the tiger stitched on his shirt. Though Tiger is apprehensive about playing basketball with this old white man, the game relieves this apprehension—Tiger smiles and tries to pretend that he's not having as much fun as he is. In playing, "neither player calls a foul," though they play aggressively against each other, a sense of respect has been built (460). But Rabbit's heart gives way and he collapses on the court. Here, Updike identifies Tiger as the new Rabbit, as Tiger runs "in the middle of the block," and "under the high excited sky," language reminiscent of Rabbit running in *Rabbit, Run* (461). Compare the former passage to Rabbit running after his game with the boys thirty years before: "Running. At the end of this block. . . . Overhead, a daytime bulb burns dustily" (*Run* 7-8). As Rabbit lies dying, America is handed off to this Tiger, destiny unknown. But they both share the instinct of the self; Tiger flees, not wanting "to get mixed up with nobody;" perhaps his experience might suggest he fears being blamed for this white man's death, as Skeeter had fled the flames that had consumed Jill in *Redux*, an act of self-preservation, an act Rabbit himself could come to respect (*Rest* 461).

Considering his reverence for Reagan, it should come as no surprise that Rabbit resorts to nostalgia, and particularly the nostalgia that yearns for the innocence of small town America where department stores were locally owned and staples of the community. They were not just stores but symbols of American entrepreneurial success, the small business owner striking for America a small blow against communism—everyone doing their part. Somewhere in this hazy remembering, America had achieved its place as the utopia of individual freedom, but somewhere this innocence was lost—we

do not know where exactly but presumably somewhere in the 1960s—which corresponds to the closing of Rabbit’s beloved Kroll’s. Though, if we compare this remembering to Rabbit’s view of Kroll’s at the time, we find the falsity of this nostalgia: “Every employee hated Kroll’s,” Rabbit had thought (*Run* 14). Reagan’s dreamy re-envisioning of America glosses over the era of segregation, widespread institutional racism and sexism, and the economic collapse of the Great Depression and persistent economic disparity among ethnic, racial, regional, and class lines. Rabbit’s America of the 1950s is Reagan’s dreamland America where reality has little place in the reimagining of the American past. Although not a racist *per se*, or in the overt ways we might recognize, Reagan built narratives tinged with racial overtones; the pining for a past that does not acknowledge America’s deeply embedded racial struggles threatens to whitewash American history—part of America’s national forgetting, as Toni Morrison characterizes. Rabbit’s reverence for Kroll’s also tinged with racism because he imagines that blacks moving into the downtown area drove whites away, and hence the money. Of course, white flight is real, but the pre-black downtown is part of his idealization of it. But Rabbit’s nostalgia does in fact fade. He grows tired of the “the old songs all that syrup about love, love, the sweetness, the cuteness, the doggies in the window and Mommy kissing Santa Claus. . . . It’s all *disposable*, cooked up to turn a quick profit” (*Rest* 419). At the moment of his reminiscence about Kroll’s Rabbit fittingly passes by Disney World and thinks about the falsity of the products being sold everywhere.

“Visiting Reaganland,” Garry Wills tells us in *Reagan’s America*, “is very much like taking children to Disneyland” where there is a “safe past, with no sharp edges to stumble against,” where “one [is] immunized against any troubling incursions” (387).

Throughout the tetralogy, the core of Rabbit's authentic self occasionally punches through the layers of jingoism, propaganda, racism, sexism, advertisements, pop culture, religion, politics, and family. It is what leads him away from the fake and fraud of Florida's propped-up fantasy of America, with its glittering condos and hotels, Sea World, and Disney World. Underneath these layers, for Updike, is the core of American identity, the legacy of the core of Protestantism, individuals alone with their God. It is actually the antithesis of Reaganism, which is why Rabbit intuitively senses that the Reagan myth is fraudulent. Reaganism attempts to freeze both past and present in some American ideal, resists historical change, and, most importantly for my purposes, it codifies American identity within the myth it proselytizes. Life is "a dialectical situation," Updike observes, "A truly adjusted person is no person at all" (qtd. in Samuels 34). Identity is personal and national dialectical, the two in conflict with one another. This friction deconstructs paradigms of American identity along racial, gender, and even religious lines. For if nothing can come between an individual and God, then this relationship remains sacred, private, and, therefore, necessitates political and ideological freedom. This freedom allows America to change and progress, not remain stuck in either Rabbit or Reagan's idealized past, but ready to be passed to the Nelsons, the Tigers, and Rabbit's grandchildren, and the America they make from it.

CHAPTER III

TONI MORRISON'S TRILOGY:

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The overwhelming majority of African Americans, hardworking and stable, are out of the loop, have disappeared except in their less-than-covert function of defining whites as the 'true' Americans. –Toni Morrison (*What Moves at the Margin* 146)

Tony Morrison's Trilogy in Context

Although Toni Morrison has acknowledged that the novels *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1991), and *Paradise* (1998) form a trilogy, little critical work has paid attention to the trilogy as a whole. In the *Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*, Justine Talley notes this “critical silence” in regard to the series, even though each of the novels has received “copious” amounts of critical attention as singular works (75). One of the main reasons for the lack of scholarship on these novels as a trilogy, Tally argues, is because of the apparent lack of substantive connections among the three works. In attempt to illuminate the subtle but important connections that bind these novels together, Tally establishes that these novels are linked through various notions such as Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, themes, and the historiography of African American history, and suggests that each novel is grounded in mysteries and center on the “question of ontology” (76). However, Tally focuses on the novels as a “concern for theories of discourse that dominated the end of the twentieth century,” such as Foucault's power and discourse theories (89). Therefore, Tally is primarily interested in how language constructs power dynamics throughout the trilogy. Alternatively, in her 2000 article, “The Past is Infinite: History and Myth in Toni Morrison's Trilogy,” Barbara Christian centers her discussion on Morrison's trilogy as an exploration of the relationship between history and memory. Christian argues that Morrison's insistence “on the centrality of memory”

over history stems from African Americans exclusion from the narratives of American history written by whites (411). As important as these issues are and as much as they help foreground my attempt to explore the connections among these novels, I argue that the strongest bond that binds these novels into a coherent trilogy is their collective preoccupation with the problematic notion of American identity. In the years between the publications of *Jazz* and *Paradise*, the second and third installments of her trilogy, many of Morrison's talks centered on American identity. In 1994, for example, Morrison wrote in "On the Backs of Blacks" that characters such as Pap from *Huckleberry Finn* and Wash from *Absalom, Absalom!* are the best clues "to what the country might be like without race as the nail upon which American identity is hung" (Morrison, *What Moves* 147).⁵⁰ In these novels, Morrison's reconstruction of one hundred years of American history not only tries to give voice to those whose history is largely ignored in mainstream American culture and society but demythologizes tenets of American identity, revealing their damaging effects on African-Americans and hindrance of social progress. Connected by themes rather than a consistent cast of characters, Morrison's trilogy covers the lives of African Americans from the 1850s to the mid-1970s. Morrison's fiction, Richard Schur argues, resists "the banner of one signifier, such as singular 'black' or 'African-American' culture," and, as I will argue, resists American identity (32). Morrison's trilogy illuminates African Americans' alienated position within American history and the sheer impossibility and impracticality of their sharing in the predominant myths of American identity without risking cultural destruction.

⁵⁰ Morrison explains that without their "glowing white masks" these characters cease to be American, as exemplified by Pap's avowal not to vote if blacks were granted the same right and Wash's murder of Sutpen once the latter treated him like a "nigger" (Morrison, *What Moves* 148).

Born into the same generation as John Updike, who came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War, Morrison criticizes Americans of the postwar era for the onset of the nation's amnesia toward slavery: "somebody forgot to tell somebody something," she declared, in addition to asserting that slavery "wasn't in the literature at all" (Morrison, *What Moves* 41). Slavery, in Morrison's view, was pushed aside in favor of more romantic versions of the American past that centered on stories of successful immigrants from European nations. Furthermore, Morrison argues that blacks too tried to forget about slavery and "abandoned the past and a lot of truth and sustenance that went with it" (Morrison, *What Moves* 41). Morrison claims that in the postwar era blacks' ideas of success were based on white models: "the old verities that made being black and alive in this country . . . were being driven underground—by blacks" (41). As Morrison portrays in *Paradise* (1998), the postwar rise of many African-Americans into the middle class not only marked an uneasy assimilation into and adoption of mainstream American culture but also came at the price of forgetting and even selectively reconstructing the past. Postwar cultural forgetting was not limited to the black community; it was an effect of the vast assimilation strategies of the era. Jennifer Slivka points out that Philip Roth, for example, laments in his autobiography *The Facts* that "there was no nostalgia for the Jewish old country" (qtd, in Slivka 145). Additionally, Slivka argues that Roth attributes this forgetting to the Jewish community's desire to leave behind what Roth characterizes as an "awful" life before coming to America and also an American identity that marginalized Jewish ethnicity as foreign. Slivka concludes that in *The Plot Against America* Roth criticizes history that "excludes minority input and authorization" (128). In fictionalizing history, Morrison and Roth attempt to reimagine

and retell American history that counters WASP hegemony. However, both writers are acutely aware that black and Jewish histories in America cannot be divorced from mainstream America. Instead, they are more interested in the ways that blacks and Jews must carve an identity for themselves within this history.

Paradise closes the series with a look at the failure of an all-black town that has abandoned its cultural roots. Founded after World War II, the town of Ruby slowly begins to unravel because of the sexism, racism, and greed of its founders. By pointing to the postwar era as marking the genesis of American, and even specifically African American, forgetting of slavery, Morrison alludes to the intense wave of nationalist propaganda that pervaded the United States in the postwar era and the kind of necessary national forgetfulness that attempts to forge a single national identity. For example, in *Paradise* the town of Ruby mimics much of postwar middle-class white society and culture and, in doing so, the town's leaders purposefully obfuscate Ruby's history. Just as Updike's *Rabbit at Rest* characterizes the Reagan myth as an attempt to return to the seemingly idyllic postwar America, the historical context surrounding Morrison's trilogy (1980s-1990s) is framed by American conservatism's resurgence during the Reagan Era and its recycling of the postwar American dream. More telling is that Morrison acutely recognized that the postwar amnesia toward slavery and its legacy had once again affected the American consciousness, just as Rabbit Angstrom had all but forgotten Skeeter and his lessons by the time of *Rabbit at Rest*. The Reagan myth romanticized pre-Civil Rights America, and the Reagan administration instituted a backlash against the legislative legacy of the Civil Rights Movement by taking aim at government support of the black community. Specifically, conservatives based their crusade to undermine and

repeal affirmative action laws on the notion that such policies were no longer needed and discriminated against whites. Second, the Reagan myth, awash in nostalgia, was constructed to rally the nation around a political narrative that conspicuously excluded the experience of black Americans and ignored the institutional and cultural racism that pervaded the United States in the pre-Civil Rights era. For Morrison, the “overwhelming majority of African-Americans, hardworking and stable, are out of the loop and have vanished except for their function of defining whites as the ‘true’ Americans” (Morrison, *What Moves* 146). Morrison cites George H.W. Bush’s Willie Horton ad as an example of a paradoxically unifying racist strategy that portrayed black Americans as the unstable Other—the non-American—that threatened “true” Americans. Morrison’s observations about the use of race in Bush’s political campaign echo passages from her celebrated monograph *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in which Morrison asserts that “within the word ‘American’ is its association with race . . . American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (47). Not surprisingly, an increase in Morrison’s political and social commentary coincides with the genesis of the trilogy. Setting the opening novel, *Beloved*, in the heart of the nineteenth century, Morrison graphically portrays slave life in an era that, Morrison argues, celebrated and birthed in its literature components of American identity, such as the Enlightenment’s conception of freedom and Emersonian individualism (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 38-39). While championed as the defining characteristic of this new American man, individualism, Morrison claims, results in “the problematics of wielding absolute power over the lives of others” (44). The others, of course, are blacks and women—the slaves

and even the post-Civil War blacks and their shared progeny who, over the course of the next century and a half, have been saddled with a cultural identity not of their making. Morrison asserts that Emerson's "The American Scholar" was part of the "highly problematic construction" of the "American as the new white man," an identity conjured with deliberate difference from black Americans (44). Specifically, this identity was assembled in reaction to blacks' very bondage by a nation that bound them. Since Morrison notes post-World War II as the beginning of the forgetting of slavery, it is striking and not coincidental that Morrison's trilogy is filed consciously among three postwar eras: *Beloved* set in the years after the Civil War, *Jazz* set in post-World War I, and *Paradise* set in the decades after World War II (Tally 75). With the exception of the war of the country's genesis, the Civil War and World War II mark America's most transformative years. America's military victories, while unifying to some, like a young John Updike, further consolidated a nationalist identity that remained centered on the primarily white, Protestant, and male. Postwar failure is a common refrain from Morrison. Her early novel, *Sula* (1973), for instance, portrayed the damaging effects of World War I on the character Shadrack, who foreshadows the deterioration of a black community. In regard to *Beloved*, Morrison's option was to set the novel primarily in the 1850s. Instead, Morrison chose to set the story during Reconstruction and in Ohio (most slavery narratives are set in the antebellum South). The outcome of the Civil War only alleviated the most barbaric aspects of racism—slavery—while Reconstruction resuscitated institutional restrictions on black freedom. In choosing the 1870s as her setting, Morrison decided to focus on the memory and trauma of slavery rather than the immediate experience of it. Slavery's legacy, rather than the evils of it alone, was clearly

her subject for explication. The problem with reading *Beloved* in isolation and not part of the trilogy is to miss Morrison's grand scope. For it is easy to understand that slavery as experienced by those who Sethe and Paul D represent was cruel and barbarously inhumane. However, the trilogy reveals the reverberating aftermath of slavery through generations. Morrison's powerful telling, as evidenced by the novel's reception, perhaps served part of its purpose by reminding Americans what Morrison believed they were choosing to forget. And most harrowing to Morrison, it seems, is that American identity continued to be defined by difference to black Americans in terms all too similar to the nineteenth century; she claims that "much academic and public discourse" has returned to "nineteenth-century liberalism" (Morrison, *What Moves* 197). For Morrison, then, the questions that *Beloved* begins to investigate involve slavery's impact on blacks who try to construct cultural and individual identities in a nation that continues to define itself against them.

As *Beloved* demonstrates, the end of slavery did not mean that blacks began to experience freedom in the same way whites did, either legally or, more significantly for Morrison, culturally and individually. Morrison illustrates the disconnection between whites' conception and experience of freedom and blacks'. *Beloved's* place at the head of the sprawling trilogy shows that this disconnect remains. Morrison is not alone in representing this disconnection; Updike's *Rabbit Redux* glimpses at this conundrum. In *Redux*, Rabbit believes racism to be past, something that Skeeter needs to get over, and assumes that since Skeeter has the same legal freedoms as he, then their experiences should not differ: "This is the freest country around," Rabbit tells Skeeter, make it you can, if you can't die gracefully" (*Redux* 204). But Skeeter's history lesson serves not only

to enlighten Rabbit about America's past transgressions but to force Rabbit to acknowledge the black presence that has shaped American identity while being marginalized by it: "We fascinate you white man. We are in your dreams. We are all the good satisfied nature you put down in yourselves when you took that greedy mucky turn" (204). Skeeter argues that whites like Rabbit define their freedom in relationship to blacks. For example, Rabbit believes black freeloading and violence limit his economic and spatial freedom. Though police brutality against blacks, Skeeter indicates, protects whites' fears of the loss of their freedoms. While Rabbit—representing white America—insists that such racism is all in the past, Skeeter recognizes how whites' freedoms continually depend on the subjugation of African Americans. While *Rabbit Redux* alludes to what Morrison refers to as the Africanist presence in the shaping of American identity, *Beloved* attempts to get at the root of it in primarily two ways. First, Morrison takes us through the spectacle of Sethe and the killing of her unnamed child who seems to return in the ghostly form of a girl called Beloved. Here I compare the true story of Margaret Garner, Morrison's inspiration for the novel, to Sethe's story in terms of national spectacle, which Morrison posits as primarily narrative. Second, Morrison seeks to reestablish cultural sites that function as touchstones for American identity through the chronotope of the ship—as in the slave ship—which is most fully realized in the novel's twenty-third chapter. The chronotope is, as Bakhtin defines it, where "time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 84). In other words, time and space in a text are interwoven, affecting characters in specific ways as they move through this literary space-time. The chronotope not only

dictates how space-time manifests in a text but also how this space-time shapes the identity of characters. As Talley notes, the chronotope features significantly in the Morrison trilogy, and in my reading, I illustrate how Morrison uses the chronotope in order to explore the identity of her characters. For example, in *Beloved*, the chronotope of the ship stands as a monument to black history, ever present in the cultural memory of its characters. In *Jazz*, Morrison's polyvocal narrative technique moves loosely through different modes: the realism of Joe Trace's narrative abruptly shifts to the allegory of Golden Gray. Surrounding the allegory are the narrator's digressions on the City—the chronotopic point of confluence for the novel's characters as they migrate to the City in search of their individuality as a way of escaping their traumatic pasts filled with racism and the constraints of segregation. Rounding out Morrison's trilogy is *Paradise* in which Morrison extensively explores the damaging effects of didactic, static myths, especially the replication of dominant American paradigms of identity by the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma.

Beloved: The Spectacle and the Chronotope of the Ship

Beloved is the story of Sethe, a woman who killed her baby in order to protect it from slavery. The novel opens in Ohio in 1873 where Sethe lives with her eighteen-year-old daughter, Denver, in a house known as 124, which is haunted by the spirit of her murdered child. Shunned by the black community, Sethe is visited by Paul D, a former slave, and the two begin a love affair that is hampered by the presence of the ghost. One day, Sethe takes in a mysterious young woman calling herself Beloved, who later appears to be a manifestation of the baby she killed eighteen years before. The novel flashes back to Sethe's and Paul D's life as slaves on a Kentucky plantation called Sweet Home during

the 1850s. Once run by relatively kind owners, Sweet Home is taken over by a cruel and sadistic slave owner, known to the slaves as schoolteacher. Schoolteacher's cruelty knows no bounds, and eventually Sethe escapes the plantation, but not before she gives birth to Denver on a small boat while crossing the Ohio River. Eventually, Sethe arrives at the home of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who resides at 124. Baby Suggs briefly serves as a spiritual leader of the free black community, but soon they turn on her and Sethe. Out of spite, they fail to warn Sethe that schoolteacher has come to capture her and her children. Just after schoolteacher arrives, Sethe kills the baby and tries to kill her other children. After Paul D learns about these events in 1873, he leaves Sethe, accusing her of behaving like an animal when she killed her baby. Subsequently, the young woman Beloved begins to drain Sethe's life in various ways, and Sethe becomes deathly ill. Eventually, the community comes to her aid, Paul D returns, and Beloved mysteriously vanishes.

Morrison's dedication in *Beloved* pays homage to the sixty million and more who died as a result of slavery. The dedication sparked controversy when a few critics suggested that Morrison simply multiplied by ten the Jewish death toll in World War II to arrive at her figure and to portray blacks as bigger victims than Jews. Morrison, though, stated in an interview that sixty million was the most conservative estimate she received from historians. Naomi Mandel notes that Morrison was calling attention to the lack of historical documentation regarding slavery and its victims rather than trying to provide an exact number. As Mandel posits, the dedication illustrates the limits of language and dares to speak the unspeakable—juxtaposing a known figure of six million Jewish deaths with the unknown number of those who died as a result of slavery. The controversy is

worth revisiting because the very fact that there was a controversy explains much about the context from which *Beloved* emanated. As Richard Schur observes, since the Civil Rights movement the “tenuous coalition” between Jews and African Americans “splintered,” leading to conflict rather than cooperation (19). Tellingly, the plans for a Jewish Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. had publicly come to fruition around the time Morrison began *Beloved*, and President Reagan helped lay the cornerstone for the museum within a year of the novel’s publication. As Mandel points out, Morrison reflected on the lack of a national—or any—memorial for victims of slavery; *Beloved* was in part written to stand in as such a monument. That the discussion centered on suspicion that Morrison had conjured the number as a direct affront to the Jewish community obscured the larger issue to which Morrison was pointing: that very few knew or seemed to care how many blacks had died during slavery. Rather than foster a discussion about tragedies of two groups of people, critics attacked a black woman’s credibility over the validity of the amount of black suffering. Thus, when considering the wholesale national remembrance of the Jewish Holocaust while the Reagan administration aggressively attempted to repeal Civil Rights legislation as well as the general historical ignorance (much of it willing) of black history, Morrison’s dedication screams for recognition in the face of historical obliteration. Morrison had earlier criticized Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s economic study of slavery for minimizing its brutality (Morrison, *What Moves* 49).⁵¹ Black suffering minimized and black achievement ignored, these Morrison saw as an attempt to erase blacks from American history: “There is little scholarly recognition,” she claims, “that a major part of American history is the history of black people” (*What Moves* 48).

⁵¹ Engerman, Stanley and Robert Fogel. *Time on the Cross*. New York: Norton, 1989.

Excluded from the national narrative (or included as only bit players), blacks are excluded from national identity. Thus, in recovering not just black but American history, Morrison attempts an integration of cultural narratives that destabilizes the prevailing hegemony of American identity. Morrison's continual refrain is not to separate out histories by race or ethnicity, but rather to point out the interconnectedness and dependency among each group's narratives. Thus, any attempt to suppress or ignore black history creates a paradox in which Reagan's America, for example, denies or overlooks the existence of black presence that is, in fact, necessary for even its own construction of American identity. Critics' hostile questioning of the accuracy of Morrison's figure of sixty million did not come from benign historical interest, but rather in large part as a reaction to her audacity to challenge the national narrative that had omitted slavery and its effects from national consciousness: "... black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean it's national amnesia," Morrison declared (Morrison, *Conversations* 120). *Beloved* attempts to force recognition of slavery and its horrors as primary in American identity and not simply belonging only to blacks as part of their obscured history.

Morrison's dedication had a profound effect. Even her critics had to admit their ignorance regarding the extent of slavery's genocide. Second, the conversation stirred public interest in the very question—even if some of the interest was sneering. But perhaps more importantly for Morrison is that her dedication, coupled with the novel and its title, attempted to provide an identity for the millions of human beings killed as a result of the slave trade. For as much as *Beloved*, both the title and the character, refers to Sethe's murdered child, the name also stands as a monolithic signifier for slavery's

victims. Further, *Beloved* invokes African mythology, spirituality, and religion, filling the cultural void carved by the slave trade. Morrison's use of these African elements defamiliarizes, challenges, and reconceptualizes notions of American identity.

At first, Morrison presents *Beloved* as the incarnation of the nameless baby whom Sethe murdered to prevent her return to slavery. Although Morrison's modeling of *Beloved* on the case of Margaret Garner is widely known and discussed, infanticide and abortion were not unheard of in slavery as mothers made heart wrenching decisions on whether death for their children was preferable to a life of slavery. Indeed, Sethe's mother killed all of her children spawned by rape. Moreover, slave children "died in droves" as a result of poor prenatal and postnatal care, and the number of miscarriages caused by conditions of slavery perhaps cannot be calculated but was surely significant (King 149).

In light of these high numbers of dead children, Morrison's use of the Margaret Garner case as the primary plot implies irony because Garner is made out to be a criminal for attempting to protect her newborn from slaveholders. Sethe's killing of her child to protect her from slavery certainly serves as the fulcrum of the plot. And as with the Margaret Garner case, Morrison suggests that there is no ethical or moral system from which Sethe can or should be judged, at least certainly not in the United States then. In fact, the novel even portrays as misplaced Paul D's and the black community's condemnation of Sethe for the killing. More importantly, to ask whether Sethe's (or Garner's) decision was right or wrong is wrongheaded to begin with; such a question attempts to place Sethe within a binary, racially constructed moral system—specifically,

it is “white” to ask such a question from Morrison’s point of view. Why? For several reasons.

First, some of Morrison’s harshest criticisms are directed at white intellectuals who study or seek out blacks as part of their theories or to satisfy their curiosity, no matter how benign these theories may seem. In *Beloved*, the more racist of those are represented by schoolteacher, the cruel slave owner who documents the animal characteristics of his slaves. In Garner’s case, the story is relayed by Reverend P.S. Bassett and appeared in a newspaper article from 1856, which Morrison included in *The Black Book* (1974) (she was its editor). Although Bassett, an abolitionist, visited Garner to expose the evils of slavery, he expresses surprise not only at Garner’s rationalizations but her mother-in-law’s admission that she “would probably have done the same” (qtd. in Plasa 41). Just as Bassett sets out to understand why Garner killed her children, readers and characters try to understand Sethe’s actions. But the irony of *Beloved*’s plot rests in the absurdity of exploring the nature of Sethe’s guilt in light of the incalculable number of slavery’s victims. Bassett wants to find out why Garner killed her child. He asks if she were in a state of madness, and so this fascination with why this *one* black slave woman would commit such an act becomes the focal point rather than why Garner was being pursued by slave catchers, that slavery existed, and the deaths of scores of black children at the hands of white slave owners and traders. Additionally, Garner became known as the black Medea, and her case was, though politically interested, a spectacle. Likewise, Sethe suffers a similar fate as her trial gains notoriety. Garner’s case became a tug-of-war between white abolitionists and slavery supporters. Slavery supporters characterized Garner as animalistic, needing to be tamed. Abolitionists countered that Garner did it in

order to protect her child from slavery's brutality. In either case, whites obsess over the reason a black person would commit such a crime—and it is up to them to find the reason. In discussing another famous trial involving an accused black person—O.J. Simpson—Morrison reflects on the consequences of the narrative whites construct when deciding black guilt:

In order to succeed it [the narrative] must monopolize the process of legitimacy. It need not 'win' hands down; it need not persuade all parties. It needs only to control the presumptions and postulates of the discussion. . . . Spectacle is the best means by which an official story is formed and is a superior mechanism for guaranteeing its longevity. Spectacle offers signs, symbols, and images that are more persuasive than print and which can smoothly parody thought. . . . The spectacle is narrative. (Morrison, *Birth of a Nation 'hood* xvii).

The effect is to “rapidly enforce the narrative and truncate alternative opinion” (xvi). Not coincidentally, a primary refrain of the Simpson case was the media's attempt to cast Simpson in animalistic terms, and by identifying him as an animal, the public would understand his primal motive: sexual jealousy. In regard to the Garner case, the narrative spectacle serves a similar purpose. Garner is either animal or victim in need of white care. As it applies to slaves in general, the latter is one of the conclusions of the most famous abolitionist text written, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Regardless, the spectacle of the black person on trial, whether real or fictionalized, allows for whites to probe, dissect, and reach conclusions about black identity, answering “Who are they and what motivates them?” The spectacle, thus, places the burden on blacks to

exhibit humanity comfortable for whites. But because whites have to discover evidence of such, it reinforces racial hierarchy. Since the discovery is made through the spectacle, the drama that plays out codifies white dominion dynamically through symbols, signs, and images. Moreover, through the spectacle white guilt is temporarily exorcised, since, in the cases of Garner and Sethe, they will either be judged guilty and animal—thus, slavery and racism justified—or exonerated because of white justice and mercy.⁵²

In *Beloved*, the narrative is so firmly entrenched that Paul D recoils when Stamp Paid shows him the article in the newspaper about Sethe's crime along with Sethe's picture; at first he cannot believe the woman is Sethe: "That ain't her mouth," he tells Stamp Paid (*Beloved* 158). Unable to read, Paul D is forced to learn about Sethe from Stamp Paid, who withholds information about the black community's refusal to warn Sethe about the schoolteacher and the slave hunters. Against his instincts, Paul D buys into the dominant narrative about the killing and decides to confront Sethe. He intimates that in killing the child she acted like an animal: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," an insult that springs up "a forest" between them (165). Paul D's insult is doubly cruel to Sethe: it mimics the language of the slave master and recalls the incident where schoolteacher's nephews rape her. Then, to animalize her, they "milk her like a cow," throw her in a pit and whip her, scarring a tree-like image on her back to inscribe her identity so she could not forget (Plasa 125). The scarring of Sethe's back reinforces not just schoolteacher's dominion over her body but defines her as an animal. The whipping

⁵² In the Simpson case, the jury was mostly African American. Following Morrison's logic, white anger at the verdict might be traced not so much to Simpson's guilt but the fact that whites were not in control of the narrative, i.e., Simpson's fate. When Simpson was acquitted, Andrew Ross argues, whites often blamed it on black jurors who either did not understand the science or simply acquitted Simpson because he was black. Ross, however, shows convincingly that the jury, in fact, had an intricate understanding of the evidence.

carves a definitive mark on her back that mimics schoolteacher's writing: he takes notes on the supposed animal characteristics of the slaves at Sweet Home. Though Paul D wonders why he himself had insulted Sethe, Paul D has a "conviction" that he "was being observed through the ceiling" (165). His insult makes him recall his own shame: when schoolteacher forced a bit in his mouth, animalizing him as well. Paul D senses the overarching narrative watching over him as he adopts the language of the master. Sethe's whipping and Paul D's physical humiliation suggest Foucault's imagining of the body, as Judith Butler puts it, as the "site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves, a nodal point or nexus for relations of juridical and productive power" (601). Both Paul D's and Sethe's bodies are sites of juridical power, or the hosts of the confluence of the relations of white power. The power is productive because it constructs the subjects (Paul D and Sethe) where the master's narrative is internalized, catalyzing the system of control. Indeed, both Sethe's and Paul D's physical humiliations are so severe that neither escaped the past. As their bodies have been inscribed with schoolteacher's discourse both have interiorized it to the point of rendering them figuratively immobile: Sethe keeps herself and Denver in the house while Paul D keeps his trauma locked up in the "tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" (86). As David Lawrence points out, schoolteacher's discourse "abstracts the human corporeality of the slave into a sign for the other in the discourse of dominant ideology . . . as blacks find themselves unable to assert an identity outside the expectations imposed upon them" (89). This presents a stark dilemma for blacks after slavery. In regard to identity, the black community cannot begin as a blank slate once slavery is ended. While the legality of slavery has ended, the deeply imbedded ideology that maintained it is still

ingrained in blacks and whites alike. To demonstrate the pervasiveness of slavery's effects, Morrison focuses primarily on a black community isolated from direct white interference. The 124 before Sethe's filicide was a "cheerful, buzzing house," the focal point of the black community, a place where "not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long" (*Beloved* 86-87). Through Baby Suggs's spiritual leadership, the community flourished, especially in the revivals held in the Clearing where the free blacks began to reclaim their identity from white supremacy. The community's spiteful turn on Baby Suggs and Sethe seems inexplicable at first, and the turn is further catalyzed when Sethe kills her baby to protect her from schoolteacher. The community's rejection of Baby Suggs and Sethe marks a striking return of the narrative's juridical power. This confluence of power relations is on one hand marked by the spectacle of Sethe's arrest. The notoriety of the crime persists for more than a decade; other children taunt Denver about her mother's deed.

Schoolteacher's arrival at 124 serves as a reminder of the reach of white power, that despite the hopes of the Clearing—the hope for a sanctuary of black space—the narrative still rules. Indeed, even the black community is fixated on Sethe's crime and obsessed with her guilt as judged by hypocritical whites. On the other hand, the black community's ostracizing of Baby Suggs and Sethe predates schoolteacher's arrival. Morrison posits this as what at first seems to be a superficial backlash against Baby Suggs's pride—as if the community were that fickle. However, the community's reaction against Baby Suggs's pride once again reflects the depths to which the white narrative has been ingrained.

Certainly, schoolteacher's attempt to capture Sethe and her children reestablishes white supremacy over the black community: he and his nephews come armed and with the sheriff. Not only are the black onlookers warned with rifles, but the presence of the sheriff represents the legal power whites hold over them. However, schoolteacher's arrival is framed in religious terms: his posse consists of "the four horsemen" (148). The religious incantation of schoolteacher's arrival at 124 culminates from the previous chapter in which the community begins to reject Baby Suggs for her supposed pride. In these two chapters, the confluence of powers—religious and legal—drop down from above on the black community; the latter is not trivial, but ideologically tethered to the narrative, the identity inscribed into the black psyche. In regard to religion, the dominant narrative among slaves was American Protestantism, and specifically as it pertains to blacks, the kind of American Christianity slaves would have been taught, experienced, and what they filtered from whites to absorb into the slaves' own version of it. Although slave owners as a group often had mixed feelings about Christianizing their slaves and many slaves viewed Christianity as a white man's religion, the groundswell of black Christian churches and church membership after Emancipation testifies to the pervasiveness of Christianity on the plantation (Raboteau 209). Black identity was firmly grounded in Christianity as it was "the one institution which freed blacks were allowed to control" in addition to being "the center of social, economic, and political activity" (Raboteau 320). Thus, the conflict results from a religious crisis—one that threatens the trajectory of black identity. The community sees Baby Suggs's growing influence as undermining their Christian beliefs:

Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? . . . healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, loving cooking, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. . . . Now to take two buckets of blackberries and make ten, maybe twelve pies. . . . Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave. . . . (*Beloved* 137).

A target of Morrison's critique throughout the trilogy (and expressed more pointedly in *Paradise*), postbellum black Christianity, with its emerging patriarchal and other hierarchical structures, modeled too closely white Protestantism—the very religion often used to keep slaves in order. True, plantation Christianity often inspired slave resistance and escapes and was crucial in many instances for forming slave communities, which is why slave owners were hesitant to Christianize their slaves. However, postbellum black Christianity formalized and distanced itself from many aspects of the slaves' Christian practices—especially those that had been influenced by African beliefs and traditions. Similar to John Updike, Morrison is interested in teasing out America's intertwined religious heritages. Both want to uncover what has been lost in the confluence. While Updike's Rabbit tetralogy seeks to recover the core of Protestantism—the individual alone with his God, Morrison tries to recover not only African influence but black Americans' collective religious identity stripped from white hegemony. Baby Suggs's revivals in the Clearing resemble the descriptions of secret slave meetings often discreetly held in places away from the purview of their masters. In such places, slaves could worship as they pleased (though at great risk) and construct their own brand of Christianity. Slave owners who permitted slaves to attend or hold religious gatherings

often forbade slaves to meet religiously without white supervision (Raboteau 215). Slaves noted a sharp contrast between white preachers who taught obedience to their masters and the lack of formal hierarchy in their own meetings—in essence the slaves’ services were more akin to African influences: dancing, singing, and celebration; if preachers emerged they emerged because they were admired for their rhetoric. Thus, these meetings were more participatory—not didactic—and, therefore, more egalitarian. Baby Suggs’s emergence as a spiritual leader follows in this vein:

she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became the unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it. . . . In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees. (*Beloved* 87)

Prior to Baby Suggs’s arrival, the community had been primarily the domain of Stamp Paid, who feels entitled because of his aid to runaway slaves. As Baby Suggs’s influence grows, she prepares a feast made from Stamp Paid’s picked blackberries. However, the community interprets her feast as a disruption of the social hierarchy—an attempt to usurp not only Stamp Paid’s position, but also usurping those who the community believed to have suffered more during slavery. Thus, Baby Suggs represents an alternative order and identity—an alternative that threatens the fragile stability the black community has newly found. The gatherings in the Clearing culminate into the feast; here, the community recognizes that Baby Suggs is on the verge of becoming their spiritual leader, and from her they remonstrate. Why? To conclude that the community is

superficial as some criticisms suggest is to overlook the power of the confluence of powers that hold the former slaves. Lawrence argues convincingly that “the unwritten codes of the community cannot yet entirely accommodate joyous self-celebration” and “the community itself remains an ‘ex-slave,’ unable to define itself outside the parameters of the slave experience” (91-92). Moreover, Baby Suggs, in taking the community in the Clearing, takes it temporarily out of the purview of the white narrative. Here, Baby Suggs helps the community to reimagine itself in opposition to their masters’ language:

in this here place we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. . . . The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your live-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (*Beloved* 88-89)

Her preaching attempts to wrest black identity from the master’s narrative, starting with the reclamation of the body. Since the slave body is the text on which the master’s narrative is written by the pen-like whip—as the scars on Sethe’s back attest—black salvation from the slave mentality begins with the flesh (Tally 84). In declaring the reclamation of the body as the prize, Baby Suggs counters Christianity’s spiritual salvation with an earthly one. For blacks to be the owners of their souls, they must first be the owners of their own bodies. Second, this love of the flesh counters white Christianity’s distaste for it, which is even more intensified if such flesh is black. Baby

Suggs leads the community to reinscribe themselves in the Clearing, without the master's code. Born in Africa, Baby Suggs has brought with her to the Clearing African influence (Zauditu-Selassie 159). Not coincidentally, Baby Suggs's leadership reaches a climax during the feast. As Zauditu-Selassie and Linda Krumholz have each pointed out, the feast represents an African ritual of healing for the community. Underscoring the egalitarian spirit of Baby Suggs's preaching is the tradition of African ritual specialists as "servants of the people" rather than hierarchical leaders; rites serve to "strengthen" the community, and "in times of colonial oppression and rapid social change, ritual symbols have also served to create and reinforce new religious and political movements" (Ray 17). Therefore, the ritual is not just to heal, as Zauditu-Selassie argues, but reveals a very real and practical need to break from the oppressor's religious and political power. However, on the precipice of breaking free, the community recoils. Here, Morrison rejects an unrealistic option: that the community could so easily choose to release itself from the prisonhouse of the master's narrative, for the legacy of slavery and the master's narrative remain intertwined in the fabric of black identity. After Sethe kills her child and she and Baby Suggs are ostracized, Baby Suggs goes silent; the gulf between Baby Suggs and Sethe and the community represents the conflicted sense of identity within the black community. Therefore, blacks, Morrison argues, experienced in the nineteenth century the fractured identity associated with postmodernism.⁵³ Rejected by whites and internally fractured, blacks, Morrison dramatizes, begin post-slavery existence still chained to white hegemony.

⁵³ *Beloved*, thus, dramatizes the emergence of what W. E. B. Dubois coined the "double-consciousness" of blacks, divided between Africa and America.

One of Morrison's most innovative achievements in the novel is to feature a character who embodies this fractured sense of identity: the eponymous character Beloved. The myriad of critical interpretations of Beloved attests to the complexity and the difficulty of pinning down succinctly what or who Beloved stands for. In fact, the very elusiveness of a definitive interpretation is perhaps the very point of Beloved, as she represents loss and the unspeakable—her meaning cannot be adequately articulated, much like the trauma of slavery. At once, Beloved represents the spirit of those who died because of slavery, and also those who were not born, died in infancy, and who did not get to *become*. The loss Beloved represents, therefore, is not just a loss of lives but a loss of all that would and could have been. Primarily, Morrison laments the stifling of African progress because of Western “rapacity” and the diverted progress of black Americans in the seventeenth century as racial lines were being prescribed: What might have become of both, she asks (Morrison, *What Moves* 53). Fittingly, Morrison centers Beloved's surreal poetic dialogue in chapter twenty-three not on Sethe's act of murder but on a slave ship. Even more innovative, Morrison attempts to merge Sethe, Denver, and Beloved into one voice—they are all Beloved: “I am Beloved and she is mine . . . I am not separate from her” begins the chapter (*Beloved* 210). From there, the monologue transitions to the description of events on a slave ship. As the novel progresses, Morrison first presents Beloved as a lost girl, then gradually as the ghostly incarnation of Sethe's murdered child; however, the monologue ultimately reveals that her embodiment is not limited to the latter.

The narrative's turn to the slave ship posits the ship as one of the major chronotopes of novels about slavery, and thus about black/American identity (others

being the plantation as in *Sweet Home*, and the river [the Ohio]). Like the plantation, the slave ship serves as a formative space of American identity. Interestingly, *Beloved* leaves the ship, emerges from the water, and seeks out Sethe—"I want the join," she says (213). *Beloved*'s movement from the ship to the water and toward her "mother" implies birth as it correlates to Denver's birth in the leaky boat along the Ohio River. We also should recall that Sethe's mother emerged from the slave ship; thus it's clear that the ship/boat is the chronotopic point of origin for these characters. Of course, in Bakhtin's imagining of the chronotope, the space-time through which a story takes place is usually more clearly outlined and persistent throughout, so there may be some hesitation to accept the characterization of the ship as a chronotope. However, Morrison's primary settings are sites of memory and, thus, noetic—taking place within the memory of its characters rather than an actual physical space. We might compare this to, say, Joyce's *Ulysses* in which much of the setting and time play out within the characters' heads rather than externally. Though we are taken back to the plantation, for example, it's the plantation as remembered by each of the characters. Since memory is how we encounter these sites, our usual picture of the space aspect of the chronotope is fractured by memory, especially when this memory is presented as a collective memory, such as the ship. Thus, the space-time of memory is where we are located mostly in *Beloved*—characters certainly meet in the actual physical settings of the novel, such as 124 and other locations that occur in present time, but mostly they relate and connect through memory. Second, by presenting time through memory, Morrison reconceptualizes time not as linear but as similar to what Benjamin Ray refers to as "time-out-of-time," a more African concept of time than a Western concept (41). In this African conception of time, the "past is recoverable," a

“constant source of new beginnings, of ontological renewal” (41). Morrison’s emphasis on the ship-plantation-river are not just necessary settings, but function as monumental memorial sites, vital to understanding not just black identity but American identity as well. Upon these sites hovers whiteness—schoolteacher/the Garners on the plantation, Amy Denver on the river, and the slave traders on the ship (referred to as the men without skin). Morrison turns conventional origins of American identity on their head. Conspicuously, Morrison downplays white Christianity’s formative influence. The novel does not necessarily reject, say, Updike’s Protestantism as a main source of Americanness but posits slavery as at the very least equally essential. The return to the slave ship in this monologue is crucial for two primary reasons. First, since the novel centers on the question of why Sethe killed her child, the monologue returns to the slave ship as the point of origin for explanation. Time, in terms of the chronotope of the ship, is made ever-present, since characters are pervading the physical world to meet at these memorial sites. It is a type of collective stream-of-memory rather than an individual stream-of-consciousness. Therefore, in the truest sense of Bakhtin’s imagining of the chronotope as literary space-time, the three women experience time as it is relative to their pain together in the site of memory, and for Morrison, the horrors of the ship are just as relevant to the horrors of the plantation in regard to Sethe’s “crime.” Thus, the explanation for Sethe’s killing of her child, inasmuch as there can be one, does not lie in the immediate “facts” collected as part of, say, a trial, but rather the explanation lies in the transcendent trauma of slavery woven into the identity of each affected individual. Second, the ship, symbolizing a point of origin of American identity, marks the genesis of the racialized master/slave society. Somewhere along the Middle Passage, cut off from

their families and culture, the Africans become Americans as “the men without skin” establish ownership of their bodies, chaining them to the hull and sticking “them through with poles” (211-212). Indeed, *Beloved* laments the loss of the Africans’ possession of themselves, wanting to see their teeth through which they once sang and spoke, which recalls the significance of the bit forced into Paul D’s mouth; she watches as a man fights “hard to leave his body”—his freedom can only come through death (210-211). But the return to the ship in this chapter is not just to delineate the genesis of this master/slave dichotomy of American identity. As much as the ship remains a monument of slavery, the novel indicates it must not be forgotten either, hence the narrative’s return to it. Finally, as Bakhtin also theorizes, there is the other dimension of the chronotope of the reader’s world. By reading about bringing the three women together in this chronotope, the reader can also experience it with them; thus, the chronotope of the ship invites an experience among characters, reader, and writer; it is the memorial site where all “meet.” While in reality, there is no escaping the ship except through death, *Beloved* figuratively escapes it through this poetic retelling: “I am not taken,” she asserts and there is no longer an “iron circle” around her neck and “no men without skin” (212). “I am not dead,” she continues, and she is ready to reconcile with Sethe: “we can now join,” the chapter concludes (213).

In John Updike’s handling of identity, there exists a core of identity that is continuously overlain by and in conflict with social, cultural, and political forces that threaten it. It is this dialectical antagonism that sets the individual’s drama with the world in motion, hence the persistent antagonism among Americans and social, cultural, and political limits. Morrison, however, sees identity forming more collectively from collective memories, traditions, and cultural trauma shared among individuals who are all

connected within that very nexus. Updike wants us to see the individual uncovered by the blanket of these very forces, for these are hindrances and obstacles to freedom, while Morrison believes that recovering this history is vital to African American freedom from white hegemony. The disruption of the dominant narrative of American history must come from the reimagining of narrative sites that challenge the spectacle that attempts to confine black identity into the realm of the other or to define it on the terms the spectacle sets forth. Morrison, however, is not opposed to a notion of individualism, for the dignity and autonomy of each individual is one of the goals of black struggle. For this, Morrison turns to her second novel in the trilogy, *Jazz*.

Jazz: The Limits of Allegory and the Chronotope of the City

To say Morrison completely transitions from one epoch to another is to miss the recursive nature of her trilogy. With *Jazz*, Morrison has moved from primarily 1873 to the 1920s, but the narrative of the novel returns to Reconstruction, reminding readers that the past, as Faulkner proclaimed, is never really past but always at work shaping culture, society, and individual lives. *Jazz* (1992) tells the story of Southern migrants, Joe and Violet Trace, who come to the City (Harlem, NY) in the early 1900s after Joe is deprived of his land by racist whites. In 1925, Joe begins an affair with a young woman named Dorcas. In a jealous rage, Joe shoots Dorcas, who refuses to identify him as her killer before she dies. Also violently jealous, Violet assaults Dorcas's corpse at the funeral, and the narrator attempts to explain Violet's actions and the effects of the City on its inhabitants. In a drastic departure from the main narrative, the narrator flashes back to the 1870s and relates the story of Golden Gray, a biracial man who was raised to believe he was white. However, he later discovers that his father was a slave who had an affair with

Gray's white mother. Gray attempts to find his father in order to kill him, but his quest is interrupted when he discovers a pregnant woman in the woods. Although Gray meets his father, he does not kill him, and the narrator breaks off the tale before she reveals his fate. The novel eventually returns to the story of Joe and Violet. Violet and Dorcas's aunt, Alice Manfred, forge a friendship, and the novel ends with the narrator musing about the meaning of the story and her relationship to the City.

Although choosing the era of the Harlem Renaissance to succeed *Beloved's* pre-Civil War and Reconstruction settings may not be surprising considering its cultural importance to African Americans (and America in general), Morrison's skepticism about the era belies the title of the novel; there's irony here. As in *Beloved*, the novel centers on the murder of a young girl, and instead of a celebratory account of a vibrant Harlem full of poets, musicians, and civil rights leaders, Morrison paints a picture of a crowded, urban ghetto failing to deliver on its promise to offer a much better life than the South. Life was *safer* from violence by whites in the North only by small degrees as Northern race riots and Northern lynchings occurred, and, economically, life for blacks was only marginally better in the cities. Politically and legally blacks fought Jim Crow in the North too, as civil rights laws went ignored and segregation was just as common above the Mason-Dixon line as it was below it. After all, race still mattered in the North as it did in the South. Moreover, blacks came into Harlem at the beginning of the twentieth century largely because of avaricious real estate prospectors, white flight as a few blacks moved into the area, and racial violence against blacks in lower Manhattan. Nevertheless, blacks moved north in droves, in part because of the cruel irony of the results of the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment. The amendment redefined citizenship for blacks in 1867, but

by the 1880s the amendment was being used not for civil rights for people but to expand the “rights” of businesses led by the infamous robber barons of the Gilded Age. As laissez-faire capitalism increased, rights of laborers, which included millions of blacks who headed north to work in factories and plants, decreased—for blacks their situation was even further exacerbated because unions often excluded them from membership and many Northern whites resented having to work alongside blacks (Wintz 3). For Morrison, the Reagan-era backlash against civil rights legislation must have seemed reminiscent of the late nineteenth century when many Reconstruction civil rights laws were either repealed, ignored, or rendered useless by subsequent legislation. Thus, despite the 14th Amendment, most whites and their laws still denied blacks as true Americans deserving of real citizenship.

In the Clearing from *Beloved*, Morrison presents a short-lived attempt by Baby Suggs to help the black community reimagine black identity, and like a rubber band the notion stretches too far, snapping back and leading to Baby and Sethe’s ostracizing and ultimately the realization that the reaches of white power have not been escaped. In the subsequent novels of the trilogy, Morrison returns to this notion of the Clearing expanded—black havens and black utopias. *Jazz* offers a further explication than *Beloved*. Since blacks were denied American identity legally and culturally, they set out to find spaces in America where they could begin anew and perhaps forge new cultural identities cut off from their past as slaves and the purview of white vigilance. The Northern migration created such opportunities, though limited, as blacks carved out neighborhoods in cities, the phenomenon that *Jazz* addresses while *Paradise* portrays the legacy of blacks’ westward movement.

The title of the novel underscores Morrison's much discussed narrative technique: a narrative of improvisation, and syncopatic rhythms; or in short, a technique that mimics the music of jazz. But jazz is also the conceit for American identity. An amalgam of African and European musical forms, mainly blues and classical, jazz illustrates the plight of blacks in the aftermath of Reconstruction. To take this conceit further, jazz uses European/ "white" instruments and elements from classical music in a way that blacks had to make use of the "instruments" and "elements" of white society in order to survive. Indeed, jazz, much like the blues, is music about cultural and individual survival (Lesoinne 157). Although it makes use of white instruments, jazz is a result of the antagonistic relationship between African and European styles: the instruments and certain elements European while retaining the spirit of black angst found in the blues and the polyrhythms of African music. Indeed, jazz sometimes appropriates and revises classical music, often to the point of parody (Lesoinne 157). But also jazz explodes classical music's strict compositional form through variation and dynamic improvisation as a way of rebelling against white music's prescriptions, and in turn creating something very different and very new. Since jazz is the product of an uneasy relationship between African and European—or we might say black and white—music, it serves as an appropriate metaphor for American identity. Jazz, in fact, is the musical product of blacks' taking what they can from white society and attempting to forge a new identity outside of the plantation.

Additionally, blacks' use of white music and instruments was reciprocal, if begrudgingly so. Wealthy whites used black jazz musicians as their source of entertainment and white musicians appropriated popular forms of jazz to capitalize on its

notoriety. Even the title of the 1920s as the Jazz Age refers mainly to whites' conception of it, so Morrison's novel attempts to redefine this jazz age on its own terms, terms that are more consistent with the depth, complexity, and emotional impact of the music. The image of black jazz musicians performing for wealthy white audiences looking for a good time in the Roaring Twenties, especially in Harlem—a place where blacks fled in part because of white violence and rent exploitation—speaks to the complex racial dynamic involved not only in the genre but also in the performance of jazz. Although the novel's characters are principally black, the narrative detours into the past, to Reconstruction, to uncover the racial identity of Golden Gray, a privileged Southerner secretly born to a white mother and black father. The jazz-like performance aspect of Morrison's narrative has been acknowledged, but the novel's plot seems to have little to do with the music—there are no nightclub and dance hall scenes or musicians that figure into the storyline; however, there is more to the narrative than just the jazz-technique: the very sounds of jazz, the performance of it tells a story of a troubled national identity, forged in antagonism, epitomized in Golden Gray who wanders the Southern backwoods only to find his black father and struggles with whether or not to embrace him or kill him; even his name is paradoxical, colors that don't quite fit but somehow must. In the Golden Gray section we encounter the antagonism of his quest while the story of Joe and Violet Trace epitomizes the new kind of American identity.

The Golden Gray section deviates from the primary narrative unexpectedly, an example of Morrison's jazzy, improvisational technique. But like the divergence from a rhythm in a jazz piece, although abrupt and jarring, the narrative's detour, while unexpected, eventually resonates with the rest of the story. The transition to the Golden

Gray section is not seamless, but the narrator hints at its purpose: “Risky I’d say, trying to figure out anybody’s state of mind. But worth the trouble if you’re like me—curious, inventive and well-informed” (*Jazz* 137). Since in the previous section Joe Trace’s monologue ends with Joe telling Dorcas what it was like to be black “back then” and about his “state of mind,” the narrator uses the Golden Gray section to explain Joe and Violet Trace’s story: why he killed Dorcas and why Violet slashed at her corpse (135). For Joe had been “new seven times,” his identity in flux as he traversed the American landscape, moving from place to place, country to city, South to North (135). The narrator’s risk is to venture into a historical explanation of Joe’s and Violet’s states of mind, risky because it threatens to dispossess them of agency and individuality. The risk also highlights the tension among art, the construction of history, and the idiosyncratic nature of a lived experience (the real to which we have no access). Indeed, the narrator comes close to apologizing for the effects of her risk, her inability to portray accurately the depth of Golden Gray’s pain. In one sense, *Jazz* is a novel about blacks emerging as individuals, especially as they move into cities away from the communal hold of the plantation and thus the plantation mentality. Therefore, the narrator, through her apprehensive tone, realizes that she risks undermining Joe’s and Violet’s roles in their own choices and control over their own bodies and depriving them of their own identities. It is this tension between individual and communal experience (where does one end and the other begin?) of which the narrator is wary. At the beginning of the Golden Gray section, though, the narrator sounds confident, declaring herself inventive and well-informed. However, this confidence erodes in the middle of her improve. Such erosion is telling because in her attempt to explain, the narrator offers up her Golden Gray tale as

an allegory; the narrative of *Jazz* not only has changed storylines, but it has shifted from the gritty, urban realism of Joe's and Violet's lives to the allegorical mode. Second, the narrative detours from the chronotope of the city to the chronotope not so much of the plantation *per se* but of the South as remnant of the plantation. Golden Gray, in the quest for his father, moves across the obliterated landscape of the post-Civil War South, an eerily ghostly place, where Wild, the specter-like woman roams and Hunter the lonely figure resides. In this episodic (within the novel), Faulkner-like allegorical romance, the narrative takes on a fairy tale-esque aura: the South becomes a magical realm, the chronotope of the totalizing quest through which Gray believes his identity will ultimately be reconciled. Indeed, True Belle, we learn, filled "Violet's head with stories" about the orphan/prince Golden Gray throughout her childhood (139). Along the road to find his father, Gray encounters a young woman asleep; he thinks she is not real but a "vision" (144). The shift to allegory has multiple implications.

First, allegory bridges the past to the present by "rescu[ing] that which threatens to disappear" (Owens 68). Allegory always points toward the significance of the past and attempts to render an experience universal while conscious of its inability to perfectly capture particulars—hence its reliance on convention and overt artifice. Joe and Violet's migration to the North marks an attempt to break from the past, the South—the last straw coming when they are run off their land. But in the North they find Jim Crow and racial violence as well. Since allegory is an instructive use of the past, the narrator's tale of Golden Gray attempts to reconnect Joe and Violet to the South and their origins. In the previous chapter, Joe's monologue, the past is rendered more concretely but without instructive or universalizing purpose. Allegory treats the past as distant, for its

overarching themes, which is why the tale of Golden Gray seems remote from the novel's main plot. Additionally, allegory, as Erich Auerbach indicates, presents time as teleological, in that the events in the past are to be read as prefiguring future events (13-14). Second, allegory is conscious of its own limitations and exhibits anxiety over its inability as a totalizing signifier. Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory is instructive here. True, Benjamin theorizes that allegory attempts to house truth, but inherent in allegory is that it is cognizant of its failure to do so.⁵⁴ Consequently, allegory "unmasks the official monuments to progress, the stabilized totalities and transfigured appearances of the dominant culture" (McCole 139); allegory purposefully dramatizes not only where synthesis between the signifier and the signified is perpetually deferred but where meaning ultimately breaks down. Golden Gray personifies such a breakdown in the sociopolitical construction of race. Gray is raised to believe he is white—and his outward appearance, golden-haired and fair skinned, makes this a natural assumption. Gray's grandfather, a Southern planter, has fathered seven children with his slaves, and so Gray embodies the repressed blackness of the nation's racial identity. His mother, Vera Louise, buys him the finest clothes, clothes that he proudly wears on his journey to kill his black father; he wears them, we are told, to flaunt his superiority, to let his father, Henry Lestroy, know that he is above his blackness. But his grandfather's wealth, coming from the labor of black slaves, has paid for these clothes. Even more ironically, the money by which Gray was spoiled and pampered financed his mother's banishment for her shame. When Gray learns that he is black—for in the legal construction of race he is black despite his whiteness—he becomes enraged. Gray later tells Lestroy that he wants to live not as a black man, but as a free man. Perhaps for Gray to say as a white man is

⁵⁴ See Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. New York: Verso, 2009.

synonymous with free legalistically, but Gray's race is not in danger of being discovered. Therefore, Gray's anger stems from his realization that he does not control his identity. His mission, to kill Lestroy, then, is to erase his blackness and to gain autonomy over his self. Since the onset of his quest, Gray has tried "shaping the story for himself," to enact the narrative he has created (*Jazz* 154). Saving the injured, pregnant black woman, Wild, gives Gray even more of a chance to show Lestroy his honor and his paternalistic power over blackness: "He wants to brag about this encounter, like a knight errant bragging about his coolness as he unscrews the spike from the monster's [Wild's] heart and breathes life back into the fiery nostrils" (154). His honor from being a man in control of his own identity (he believes) gives him power over life and death; this he wants to show Lestroy: that he is able to transcend his black blood and be his own man. Read allegorically, Gray, like America, wants to deny that blackness is a part of him; consequently, this denial dehumanizes blacks and, ultimately, incites violent against them. But Gray's narrative cannot hold; he senses this, reminiscing about how True Belle used to smile at him and now realizing she smiled because she knew the secret. He had thought that race fit easily into categories, that there was one kind of blackness, "True Belle's kind," but he now knows "there was another kind—like himself" (149). Although in his rage-filled quest, he attempts to regain control over his identity, eventually Wild, whom he firsts detests for her dark skin, derails his plans. What becomes of Gray is unknown; his story fades into the narrative. But Wild and her pregnancy remind him of the fragility of his own being, how little power he has over his self; even his encounter with Lestroy does not go as planned. Lestroy's attention is more on the care of Wild and her baby than on Gray's revelation. Gray, the narrative hints, fully immerses himself into

blackness by running off with Wild into a cave, unable to live in a world where he is not in control of his identity. Still, the narrative hints at another possibility in that “he disappears into the expansive promise that is the post-bellum United States” (Brown 636). If it is the latter, Gray chooses to pass as a white man or as a black man (which is less likely); either way he retains some power over his identity while acknowledging that his choice of race will determine his American destiny.

Just as Gray’s own narrative falls apart, so does the narrator’s allegory. Cognizant of it, the narrator asks, “What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him [Gray] so poorly?” (*Jazz* 160). Earlier, the narrator had called a Gray a hypocrite and wondered why he didn’t wipe Wild’s face. Her answer was that he wanted Wild to look savage to confirm his racial superiority. But now, she has “to think this through, carefully” and, instead, wish “him well” (161). She admonishes herself for not noticing that his “hurt . . . was not linked to the color of his skin, or the blood beneath it. But to some other thing that longed for authenticity” (160). As much as allegory may illustrate America’s racial drama, the narrator recognizes that allegory cannot depict accurately individual experience. More specifically, in an attempt to allegorize Gray she risks depriving him of his individuality and downplaying the enormous internal conflict for Gray or any other mixed-race individual. The narrator claims, “I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am” (160). Thus, while the allegory may serve a particular purpose, it fails to totalize experience, yet deconstructs race as a definable category on which American identity rests. Moreover, race is a lived experience more than it is just a matter of skin color. Even if Gray chooses to pass as white, he is not necessarily white simply because a community treats him as such—race is not just what

the community perceives, but how individuals live with race within their own mind. Gray realizes that even if he passes as white, he will still live not as white, but as a black man passing.

The interruptions of the narrator indicate the anxiety of representation; the mixture of styles, the earthy realism of Joe and Violet and the allegorical Golden Gray tale, also suggest Morrison's postmodernist formal posturing. However, the juxtaposition of two modes, as in jazz, may represent not only the limits of representation, but also the power of their confluence. In *Jazz*, history as allegory implies the inseparable yet complicated relationship between historical determinism and individual freedom. As contrast, the allegory is surrounded by and, indeed, segues back into Joe and Violet's story. Individual freedom among blacks must be prefaced with a collective breaking away from white dominion. The first step is to recognize the fatal flaw in whites' conception of race. True Belle conveys this to Violet through the allegory of Golden Gray; indeed, the storytelling of this former slave serves an instructive purpose for her grandchild. The narrator imagines that Violet may have come to love Golden Gray; the stories True Belle introduced to her at age twelve and this introduction in Violet's pubescent years suggest a connection to her later love for Joe, the child of Wild, who we learn is himself probably of mixed blood. When Violet reminisces about Joe, she thinks of the "golden boy" who "tore up" her "girlhood as surely as if we'd been the best of lovers" and "from the very beginning" Joe was "a substitute" for her first love, Golden Gray (97). Admittedly, the narrative never directly tells the reader of Joe's mixed heritage, but this opacity illustrates the sordid, and often hidden, history of miscegenation.

Morrison's inspiration for *Jazz* was an old photograph she found in James Van Der Zee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. The picture was of a dead girl, killed by her lover. Just before she died, friends asked her to tell them who shot her; not wanting her lover caught, she replied, "I'll tell you tomorrow" (Stave 59). The scene is fictionalized in *Jazz*, as Joe shoots Dorcas, and she refuses to identify him as her killer. Read often as a testament to the power of love—and thus a figurative expression of blacks' reclamation of their own unique emotions (their right to love whom and how they please), the scene is overlooked for the way in which it depicts the black community's attempts at autonomy within America (and its resistance to white authority). In *Beloved*, the aftermath of Sethe's filicide forms the core of the spectacle, the narrative of black guilt/innocence that whites control. Dorcas's refusal to implicate Joe and her aunt's subsequent decision to forego police/prosecutorial involvement illustrate how members of a community often choose their own version of justice rather than submit even criminals among them to the justice system of the ruling elite. Communities that feel culturally, ethnically, and/or racially isolated from the state often prefer to handle justice internally, not wanting to subject their members to various types of humiliation and deprivation of dignity or to a type of justice that violates their own customs and/or sense of morality. Indeed, *Jazz* opens with just such an explanation of Joe's legal status: Dorcas has been murdered; the community knows who did it. Whites can't prosecute because there were no witnesses, and, more significantly, Dorcas's aunt, Alice, does not pursue the case for two reasons. First, she "didn't want to throw money around to helpless lawyers and laughing cops," and she "found out that the man who killed her niece cried all day and for him and for Violet that was as bad as jail" (4). Alice decides ultimately (despite her private longing to

attack Violet) that Joe and Violet's grief serves a truer sense of justice than the kind of justice that whites could supply. Since the narrative stresses Joe's suffering, justice in *Jazz* is rendered closer to its more natural form than its corruptible bureaucratic one; additionally, justice is what the community and one's true peers deem as sufficient punishment for a crime rather than the pronouncements of an alienated system that has no emotional or cultural stake, ties, or investment in the verdict—especially within a system that does not fully recognize blacks' American identity. Indeed, the narrative transitions from Alice's satisfaction that justice is being done to the community's concern for Violet. Her name is mentioned at the Salem Women's Club “as someone needing assistance” despite “the grief” she caused when she tried to attack Dorcas's corpse during the funeral (4). True, the women's club decides against helping Violet; however, this is because the club decides that a family who had lost everything in a fire needed help more. Regardless, the community's concern is for both victim and perpetrator where community well-being is valued more than retributive actions against a criminal. This is especially made clear because the extent of Joe's guilt is not so clear cut—he shoots Dorcas in the shoulder, and Dorcas tells those at the party not to call an ambulance when she might have been saved. The true healing for the community comes not from Joe's legalistic punishment, but from Violet's and Alice's growing friendship as Violet seeks to understand and forge a connection to Dorcas.

While celebrating some aspects of the City, *Jazz* insists on the need for such communal connection as an essential part of American identity. The North's defeat of the South in the Civil War made one thing abundantly clear: the United States was headed toward industrialization and urbanization. *Jazz* renders one aspect of these consequences:

blacks leaving the South to work in the North. In this new era, black leaders laid out different conceptions of the “New Negro.” Booker T. Washington’s *A New Negro for a New Century* posits the New Negro as “twentieth century capitalists” in order to use economic power to eventually integrate, while Ida B. Wells argued that whites were retaliating against black businessmen for competing against them (qtd. in Stewart 14). Indeed, *Jazz* accommodates Wells’s position more so than Washington’s. Joe explains he was inspired by Washington’s having “a sandwich in the President’s house” and “decided to buy me a piece of land” (*Jazz* 126). However, whites forced him off the land “with two slips of paper I never saw nor signed” (126). Washington’s strategy having failed him, Joe says that this is when he became new for the fourth time, finally leaving the South for good.

The narrator is the key into the City, then, and we enter this City through the beginning of this gossip. Morrison’s City, though, is chronotopic—it is based on Harlem, but the City, as its generic name might suggest, is figurative. As a chronotope, the City functions almost identically to Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope of the road. In fact, much of *Jazz* resembles a road narrative: Joe narrates his story on how he came to the City, the trips and events from his journey from the South to the North; Golden Gray’s quest from the city into the country attempting to discover the roots of this identity. According to Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road “is a particularly good place for chance encounters” where “varied people . . . intersect at one spatial and temporal point” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 243). The City, as presented by Morrison, is like an open road where people meet by chance and the cosmopolitan makeup of the city allows the meetings of people from a variety of backgrounds. Indeed, *Jazz* shows the diversity of

African Americans, rather than presenting them as monolithic in culture and thought. Joe and Violet are from the South, while Dorcas is from the Midwest, and Alice has been living in the City, each with varying attitudes and experiences within the nation. Yet, here they meet at this particular spatial and temporal point. The City, according to the narrator, is not closed off—as could have been presented, a suffocating stifling place—but rather it is intimidating for its openness, spontaneity, and unpredictability. The beginning of the novel is, in fact, a chance encounter, presumably along a city street, the narrator seeing Violet from not too far away. For the narrator the streets of the City are where it's at, where lives unfold for the narrator to peek into. The City is the place where blacks from across the country have fled, into what they believed to be their road's destination, but in fact is just a continuation of "the course of life" that unfolds in the City as it does on the road (*Jazz* 244). At the end, the narrator realizes this, having been just a listener, and now desires to get out and begin to live a life of her own (220). The City, like the road, is a place where identities can be lost, which the narrator seems to have lost, but also remade, but only if the past itself is first reconciled rather than forgotten.

The City in *Jazz* appears to offer another conception of the New Negro: that of self-determination as espoused chiefly by Alain Locke (Stewart 15). But Morrison appears hesitant to embrace this view as well. Self-determination downplays, if not denies, the influence of the past. Second, it seems too closely aligned with the individualist mentality, which resists the need for community. The City provides the allure and illusion of individualism that involves, as Madhu Dubey argues, the "erasure of history" (136). As Dubey further points out, the narrator echoes the sentiment: "There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things that nobody-could-help stuff. That was

everybody then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last" (*Jazz* 7). However, Joe cannot flee totally from the past; his assault on Dorcas stems in part from his mother's rejection of him. In addition, the narrator declares, "When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-cropper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible—like the strong. . . . At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so" (7). But the narrator's need to tell the story of Joe and Violet betrays her own need to belong. Culture and community are the muses from which the artist must work. Updike's Rabbit is in the community, but his real self plays out inwardly, and he meanders in the Kierkegaardian "zigzag" (Updike, *Higher Gossip* 70). As we see in Philip Roth's trilogy, Nathan Zuckerman retreats from the world in order to write about it, but Morrison's narrator moves within the milieu in which she is working. The individual is not masked by or does not need to retreat to the margins of society in order to discover the self, but instead finds themselves most creative when part of and responding to the community. This is the lesson that Golden Gray finds difficult to learn. Morrison posits her storyteller as a natural storyteller, a gossip, who sees someone along the street and turns to a listener and says, "Sth, I know that woman"—the sound and words that open the novel—a sound like a hushed gasp a gossip might make when surprised and excited to see someone they can talk about (*Jazz* 3). The "Sth" sound indicates the story is not planned, but spontaneous, ready to roll off the tongue and through each breath of the narrator—like a jazz musician beginning to play, to riff off and expand on a note, a mood, a feeling, a thought that plays off the cue given from the City. The individual is not one who seeks to separate, or flee, but one who seeks and even longs for community. There are, though,

similarities between Morrison's concept of the individual and Updike's. Rabbit's zigzag is the result of the constant tension between his individuality and his desire to come back to his family (he repeats his flight-return pattern). In *Jazz*, the narrator needs to feel separate from the City in order to observe it, but ultimately wants to return to it, to become a part of the community and connect with other people. And herein lies the drama of identity in *Jazz*: in order to re-experience community, blacks after slavery and because of Jim Crow need to experience individuality before they, hopefully, re-commune. From this expansion and contraction, a new American identity can be forged.

Paradise: Myth and Ritual

In *Paradise* (1998), a group of men that leads the all-black town of Ruby, OK massacre women in order to preserve their power over the town's inhabitants. The massacre takes place in 1976, but the novel flashes back to the nineteenth century when black settlers began to move into Oklahoma in addition to various moments leading up to the massacre. The murdered women had lived at a place called the Convent some miles outside of the town's limits. The women at the Convent are a loose collection of personalities, women who come and go as they please. The Convent is run by Consolata, who takes in the female transients and provides them with spiritual leadership as well as room and board. The novel explains the origins of Ruby, founded in 1952 primarily by Deek and Steward Morgan after the failure of Haven, another all-black town that collapsed largely because of the Great Depression. The Morgans are intent on controlling the town's founding mythos, symbolized by the Oven, a monument built by the original founders of Haven. Additionally, many of the men want to keep Ruby racially pure, and they ostracize those whose skin is too light. As the town begins to deteriorate, the men

use the women at the Convent as scapegoats and shoot the women, presumably killing them all. However, the women's bodies are never recovered, and the details of the event remain obscure. Pat Best, one of the women ostracized because of light skin, begins to reconsider the town's history and investigates the shooting.

From the chronotopes of the ship and plantation in *Beloved* to the city in *Jazz*, Morrison concludes her trilogy by shifting to the American West. An ideological space forming one of the main tenets of American identity, the Western myth is not only deconstructed by Morrison but comes to symbolize the failure of a racial utopia. Part of America's Western myth is the desire for white men to move further into the American wilderness, to remake themselves as purely American—finally distinct from their European counterparts—to displace or defeat the “savage” Indian, to help America to fulfill its manifest destiny, and to bring about the ultimate evolution of the white race by fleeing, in essence, blacks to prevent miscegenation (M. Johnson 58). Blacks settling the West, however, could not and did not participate in this mythology except as the antagonistic and threatening force that helps drive whites further into the frontier. However, the myth and the reality are distinct planes: blacks did move westward, ironically, largely to flee whites or at least their systems of oppression before and after the Civil War. Ideologically, black participation in the settlement of the West was not commensurate with the mythic narrative, and, not coincidentally, blacks' roles in westward expansion were ignored and even today remain largely absent from the national consciousness about the West, as the lack of blacks' presence in popular representations of the era attests. More importantly, exclusion from the mythos means exclusion from American identity then and subsequently, a recurring denial each time the Western myth

is invoked. However, blacks moving westward sought land ownership as a way to assert their rightful claim to American citizenship. Bonnie Lynn-Sherow quotes William Eagleson, a black farmer and later editor of the *Langston City Herald* in Oklahoma, as declaring, “We propose to exercise our prerogatives as American citizens, be it on a forty, eighty, or 160 acre tract. . . . We are in this race to finish” (qtd. in Lynn-Sherow 42). Such a declaration was necessary because many white farmers were intent on driving blacks off the frontier, illustrating that the West was as unaccommodating to blacks as the rest of the nation. The racism led to the formation of all black towns, especially in Oklahoma, the primary setting of *Paradise*. Although immigrant whites and American whites who moved westward did not as individuals necessarily see themselves as part of a grand myth—survival and a chance at prosperity were their immediate goals—the myth’s pull and influence centered on the notion of the “Virgin Land” unused and virtually uninhabited.⁵⁵ Since in the mythic construction the Indians did not cultivate the land—in the Lockean sense of mixing labor with the land, which justifies private ownership—they did not own it but were simply an unfortunate part of the landscape. In American literature, Washington Irving and Walt Whitman wrote as if Indians were invisible peoples; Irving was especially oblivious that “Indian management practices had in fact created the park-like scenes [he] found so appealing” for their “wild” beauty (qtd. in Lynn-Sherow 9). Thus, the mythic frontier was clearly a white space while a continuation of whites’ struggles against the non-Americans among them. Blacks, though, were determined to forge recognition of their American identity through owning and cultivating land; to some degree and while in competition with Indians for land some black farmers appealed to whites that Indians did not know what to do with the land they

⁵⁵ See Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*.

had (Lynn-Sherow 9). Part of blacks' experience on the frontier was an enactment of Booker T. Washington's theory of racial progress: prove Americanness by demonstrating economic productiveness through the means available. Indeed, the men of Ruby in *Paradise* have mastered the craft of land ownership and set up a society that mimics white America.

However, symptomatic of the postwar era, black assimilation, Morrison finds, results in a near cultural death trap for blacks as they replicate white racism and patriarchal Protestantism. Beginning and ending in a massacre of women in 1976, *Paradise* more pointedly attacks male-dominated Christianity as the men of Ruby eerily reenact scenes from American history, such as the persecution of women akin to the Salem Witch Trials and racial segregation. Similar to John Updike in some respect, Morrison appears to reject postwar utopian thinking, though it is not entirely clear whether or not she rejects utopian thinking categorically as Updike does (Morrison states, "*Paradise* is about going into the wilderness and attempting to create utopia, then asking, 'Why does it collapse?'" [Morrison, *Conversations* 204]). Additionally, while Updike sees American postwar Christianity as a corruption of the spirit of Protestantism, Morrison suggests that the patriarchal system and exploitative capitalism are inherent in white American Protestantism, so the novel pushes beyond this traditional Christianity as a defining element of American identity. *Paradise* visits some of the themes of Updike's *Rabbit, Run*: the restrictive elements of hierarchical organized religion in postwar America; additionally, one of the women of the Convent, Mavis Albright, hits the road like Rabbit, fleeing her husband and children while searching for an opaque sense of freedom. Mavis, similar to Rabbit's wife, Janice, is negligent in the death of her children

who die in similar ways (Janice accidentally drowns her daughter while Mavis leaves her twin toddlers to suffocate in a locked car). Mavis, then, seems to enact the part of a fleeing Janice—a woman saddled with overbearing domestic responsibilities and a lousy husband. Furthermore, the sex scene between Mavis and her husband Frank reads very similarly to a scene in *Rabbit, Run* where Rabbit uses Janice lustily. After leaving her family, Mavis stops at a gas station with “a Florida map” in the car—Rabbit stops at a gas station and intends to drive to Florida the night he leaves Janice (*Paradise* 29). Mavis, though, goes west, dreaming of California, all the while picking up female hitchhikers in search of friendship. She eventually finds it at the Convent and thrives among the all-female group. Mavis and the other women in *Paradise* have found the nuclear family, which Morrison declares a white model, unfulfilling, a patriarchal family structure in which men can easily dominate—and as in Mavis’s case—abuse them (Morrison, *Conversations* 123). Thus, Mavis’s idea of freedom differs from Rabbit’s in at least one respect: rather than the angst of the private self, it is a search for a real physical freedom from an abusive husband as well as the mental prison that comes along with such abuse. Indeed, in the “paradise” of Ruby, the men have seized not only power over the town and its religion, but also over their families. The seizure of power, we learn, began in 1952, marked by the death of Ruby Morgan for whom the town is ironically named. The year 1952 ushered in the Eisenhower era, a time when the full force of cultural propaganda centered on the primacy of the white patriarchal nuclear family.

The US’s victory in World War II reinvigorated American myths, especially that of American exceptionalism; although this myth took on a more decidedly geopolitical element (as we recognize it today), it also carried with it the myths of the past, such as

America's Christian religious destiny. Indeed, the two are intertwined to disputable degrees, but nevertheless, the symbiosis exists. As America began to remake itself in the glow of its new global power, these myths replayed, albeit galvanized in modern form. As mentioned previously, Morrison believes the postwar period was a critical period for the black community because this is when slavery and black history were forgotten and/or not discussed. Through the men of Ruby, Morrison dramatizes the consequence of this forgetting. Rather than cull their founding mythos from a unique slavery experience (outside of Christianity) or Africa, the men instead replicate the Puritan narrative of the founding of a new Promised Land. True, most blacks moved to Oklahoma for practical reasons—to escape Southern oppression; notably, blacks left Memphis for Oklahoma after three lynchings; Oklahoma was then referred to as “the Land of the Negro,” or the destiny of the “Exodusters,” those blacks who left the South for the Midwest (Goble 119). Nevertheless, some blacks saw themselves as part of a Judeo-Christian myth: an exodus from a land of slavery ordained by God.⁵⁶ Morrison, though, does not seem completely critical of this narrative; in fact, it's perhaps culturally necessary and, maybe more importantly, inevitable that black migrants would find solace in this myth, having left the South. Scholars such as Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos, Katrin Dalsgard, and Marni Gauthier each note that the men of Ruby mimic America's Puritan myth microcosmically. Fraile-Marcos, for example, identifies the irony of this mimicry: that in trying to maintain a “paradise,” in essence resisting outsiders and trying to protect itself from white America, the town of Ruby actually becomes an “index” to their very “Americanization” (Fraile-Marcos 10). As much as Morrison appears critical of this

⁵⁶ I understand that many Jewish people often reject the concept of “Judeo-Christian.” However, in this particular case—the mythos of the Exodus that is pertinent to both religions—I use this term.

myth, she is also interested in exploring the cause of its replication. The novel informs us that Haven was founded in 1890 when black settlers in Oklahoma were turned away not only by whites but by other blacks as well. Known in the novel as the Disallowing, this event becomes a revered religious-like myth for the residents of Haven and later Ruby, who incorporate a reenactment of the Disallowing into their Christmas pageant alongside Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem. The settlers were "aggressive[ly] discourage[d]" by "Negro towns already being built" (*Paradise* 13). Morrison intimates that blacks were already replicating white racial and economic prejudice; they disallowed the settlers because they "did not have enough money 'to satisfy the 'self-supporting' Negroes required'" and also because of the blackness of their skin (14).⁵⁷ The rejection is especially traumatic to the settlers because they believed that they shared with other blacks the unifying mythos of the black Exodus—that they were collectively "destined" to find the Promised Land. However, since the blacks who already were there deemed themselves as specially chosen because they were the first to settle, they began to see themselves as different from the newly arrived. Thus, the novel illustrates the problem with the myth of "chosen peoples"—everyone else becomes "others" who are antagonistic to their destiny, just as many white Americans viewed other races in their midst. In turn, the new settlers use this rejection; it becomes "the controlling" tale that "explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves" (13).

Although the rejection by other blacks boils the blood of Haven's founders, continual white racism also serves as a motive to isolate the town. First, Zechariah

⁵⁷ The basis for the "Disallowing" is an actual sign in an all-Black town that read "Come Prepared or Not at All," as the novel references, and included a caption that warned of "rough" treatment of other blacks if they came without "sufficient money" (Jessee 93).

Morgan, a Haven patriarch, was once named Coffee until he renamed himself after white men shot him in the foot for refusing to dance, and he set off further into the frontier. To Zechariah, every group of white men looked like a threatening posse on the lookout for a chance to lynch blacks. By the turn of the century, Oklahoma had indeed become as threatening to blacks as areas of the South, culminating in the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot, the worst race riot in American history. According to Alfred Brophy, expert on the origins of the riot, “Oklahomans spoke of ‘negro drives’—the use of violence to drive out blacks from a town or county” while law enforcement did nothing to prevent and probably even aided these efforts (8-9). The Tulsa Riot was preceded by other attacks on black individuals and communities. The increase of violence against blacks by whites in Oklahoma was “partially the response . . . to the rising aspirations of blacks” (Brophy10). Further, lynchings were often the result of faux-outrage over the supposed rape of a white woman by a black man. This calls to mind Morrison’s famous opening line to *Paradise*: “They shoot the white girl first” (*Paradise* 3). Although the identity of the white girl is not ever made clear in the novel, that the black men kill her first and feel that “with the rest they can take their time” indicates that there is a significance in the first killing (3). Since the black men attack the women at the Convent from a deranged sense of communal preservation, killing the white girl first demonstrates an immediate snuffing out of the symbol of racial purity used to justify racism and violence against blacks. Indeed, whites singled out the fear of miscegenation as outright justifications for racism and lynchings, thus around white women hangs the emblem of their degradation. The reason the men feel that they can take their time for the rest is because these are lives they can control more easily—figures within their control as they have already controlled to

their satisfaction the women of Ruby. The men, thus, attempt to re-seize power over the myth by eradicating those they believe have threatened it. As Jill Matus points out, “Morrison has observed” (157) that when women break away or attempt to break away from patriarchal power “is when we are assaulted (qtd. in Matus 157). The novel seems to ask why these men replicate a social structure they themselves despised. The novel sketches around the origin of the Christianity-based patriarchal origin of Haven—or at least the role of women in its origin is not altogether clear. One explanation is the passage in the novel where Pat Best remarks that the men favored Booker T. Washington’s methods to achieve progress, a critical allusion to Washington that echoes *Jazz* (*Paradise* 212). Critics of Washington’s approach felt, in one respect, it too imitative of white society (as well as naïve expecting that whites would simply accept them as economic competitors). Evidence exists that shows some black men, particularly black cowboys, adopted the American Western myth in order to assimilate more easily with whites on the frontier; for example, Michael Johnson argues that Nat Love’s *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* (1907) was influenced by Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901) and functions as “a narrative of assimilation” (M. Johnson 98). In Love’s narrative, he sets out to demonstrate his masculine bond with whites which is “cemented by shared acts of violence sometimes against minority racial and ethnic groups,” and his transformation into a cowboy “hinges on the myth of regenerative violence” (M. Johnson 102-103). Love’s narrative is one example, but Johnson offers examples of black men at times adopting white masculinity as part of the Western myth (as well as their deconstruction of it). Additionally, Johnson sees Morrison’s *Paradise* as a critique of such. Thus, the novel shows a confluence of two powerful patriarchal constructs:

Christianity and the frontier myth. Within the context of the trilogy, Morrison had earlier marked the rejection of Baby Suggs as a failed moment to reclaim the more African matriarchal religious aspects (but not matriarchy as a system) which, as demonstrated in *Paradise*, gave way to a male-dominated religious order.

The second act of white racism that fuels further isolation comes in 1952 when Ruby Morgan is refused treatment in a white hospital; instead, the nurse calls a veterinarian to treat her, and she dies. Outraged, Deek and Steward Morgan, World War II veterans and new patriarchs, seem to name the town Ruby more as a reminder of another “disallowing” than a tribute to their sister, thus recycling the mythic founding of Haven for the new town. In the instance of this second disallowing, Deek and Steward see the failure of postwar America to move beyond the racism of the past. First, Haven suffers greatly from the Depression, and even after the war Haven does not benefit from the postwar boom. Though eventually the prosperity touches Ruby as the consumer goods begin to pour into the town throughout the 50s, “an increase in bounty that had never entered their dreams. . . . In every Ruby household appliances pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed” (*Paradise* 89). But consumerism leads to competition of status, or the “garden wars” among the housewives of Ruby, since the appliances give them idle time to plant flowers “for no good reason” (89). The plants they grew “could not be eaten” but “spread” leading to a “frenetic land grab;” “the consequence,” the narrator explains, “remained—fat, overwrought yards” (90). The excess leads not to communal prosperity but more toward greed as the Morgans begin to consolidate even further their hold on the town financially and politically. Additionally, Sargent Person, another wealthy townsman and friend to the Morgans, participates in the

murders at the Convent for economic reasons—i.e., so he can take over the land the Convent is on. Indeed, the novel seems to allude that this is eventually where Washington's process of racial uplift will lead since it is modeled on white capitalism. Like Rabbit in *Rabbit, Run* many characters in the town, including the Morgans themselves, begin to feel disillusioned, though the novel focuses more on the disillusionment of some of the female characters, such as Soane Morgan and Sweetie Fleetwood, who feels pulled spiritually toward the Convent. Despite their growing concerns, the Morgans choose isolation and stasis rather than openness and progression. Whites mean death, and they go to great lengths to ensure that they do not enter the town either actually or through blood. The Morgans' resistance to change sets up a conflict between Reverend Misner along with the younger townspeople and the old guard as Misner encourages involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. In one scene, a white family pulls up to Ace's Grocery where the husband gets out to ask for directions. Anna Flood, who is suspicious of the Morgans, and Reverend Misner are polite and attempt to help him, but Steward is hostile. Misner tells him that "God has one people, Steward. You know that" (123). But Steward replies, "I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something based *on* ignorance" (123). The Morgans' attempt to keep the town racially pure extends to prejudice against marrying light-skinned blacks: the novel uses the term "8-Rock blood" to describe the "pure" blacks in the town (named for the blackness of the 8th layer of rock beneath the earth). The light-skinned blacks are looked down upon, such as Pat Best and her daughter Billie Delia, who eventually goes to the Convent. To keep the town racially pure, the Morgans believe that contact with the outside world must be avoided. However, some of the old

guard begin to break ranks. Royal Beauchamp, for example, begins the charge to change the name of the Oven, the sacred shrine that goes back to the founding of Haven. Worse for the Morgans is that Royal wants to give it an African name; Soane Morgan, wife of Deek, thinks she “had the same level of interest in Africans as they had in her: none” (104). Royal represents the rising black power movement and wants to confront whites, arguing that the Morgans’ way of isolation “was slow, limited to just a few, and weak” (104). The Morgans, though, believe that getting involved with the Civil Rights Movement is a fatal mistake since they believe they have achieved their goal of a black utopia that flies under the radar of white law and society. However, the novel undermines this naïve assumption: many of the townsmen have served in the two world wars while in Haven, including the Morgan twins themselves, and now since Ruby’s founding the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War hangs ominously in the background of the narrative. Several of the town’s young men are killed in the war, such as Billy Cato and both of Deek Morgan’s sons, while Menus Jury suffers from PTSD and Jeff Fleetwood’s children suffer from birth defects as a result of his apparent exposure to Agent Orange or some other war chemicals. The effects of the war decimate the town’s already lagging morale as well as the pool of young men; the town is sterile. The war and its toll on Ruby prove that no true isolation can exist. Eventually, America’s global politics would find its way even into rural Oklahoma just as consumerism had flowed into the town the previous decade. But rather than concede the town’s demise or the fatal flaw of its design, the men turn to the Convent as a scapegoat.

American identity has never been politically or economically controlled by women, so Morrison hesitates to speculate on what such a female-led model might look

like. If freedom, that opaque American cry, means anything in the hands of Morrison, at its very least it means the freedom to come and go while not beholden by anything other than one's own desire. While American novels in the past have engaged this concept from a male perspective, Morrison asks the reader to reconsider this notion. But the novel never gets beyond this most nascent manifestation of women's freedom; they are cut down violently. The notion appears simple enough, but as the novel bears out, the men of Ruby cannot bear such a prospect of unregulated women. Typically, it appears that from Morrison's perspective, that male ideas of freedom have usually meant an abandonment of social responsibility or an abuse of power—the freedom to hold another in bondage. Indeed, American identity historically has rested on the regulation of female behavior whether through prescription or harsh social punishment. Additionally, this has also meant either relegating the familial and economic burden of children to women who suffered as a result or to place women under the control of husbands and fathers under the law who could then do as they pleased. Women often died a legal death in marriage, and in *Paradise* this is dramatized in the living deaths that some of the women in Ruby lead. The Morgan wives, for example, feel powerless to challenge their husbands. Of course, this is exacerbated by race, but by disguising the race of the white girl Morrison obscures the specific implication of its meaning in regard to sexism. Since white women themselves have been under patriarchy, it is impossible to know how racism would manifest from them under other conditions. The novel has been criticized as a male-bashing treatise, since it is the story of men who massacre women, so Morrison appears to see sexism as much of a problem as racism. However, the two, in the context of the trilogy and in the cultural context of America, are intertwined. Since the men of Ruby

mimic white America and much of their isolationist stance is in response to white racism, it is important to see the men's attack on the Convent in the entire context that the novel provides. Because much of American identity has been predicated on male freedom, that freedom has come at the expense of women's. To reiterate, Morrison charges that American notions of freedom have typically translated into the freedom to subjugate others; paradoxically, this type of freedom she associates with slavery and racism. *Paradise*, though, makes it pointedly clear that sexism has as much to do with this equation as well. Since slavery and subsequent Jim Crow laws were based squarely on race, white men's freedom to enslave or to discriminate also depended heavily on their ability to control white women's sexuality; miscegenation was a palpable threat to undermine the entire system of race-based laws. Indeed, Colonel Gray's slapping of his daughter Vera Louise from *Jazz*, in spite of his own sexual misbehavior, is about his inability to control her (an anathema to his whole sense of being). American identity based on this notion of white men's freedoms was not just abstract, but a real ideology with real legal and political consequences for the entire nation. So interwoven into the fabric of the country was this ideology that a pervasive force of laws and social mores maintained it. Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*:

There is still much national solace in continuing dreams of democratic egalitarianism available by hiding class conflict, rage, and impotence in figurations of race. And there is quite a lot of juice to be extracted from plummy reminiscences of "individualism" and "freedom" if the tree upon which such fruit hangs is a black population forced to serve as freedom's

polar opposite; individualism is foregrounded (and believed in) when its background is stereotyped, enforced dependency. (64).

Jim Crow may have targeted specifically blacks, but women, regardless of race, lived under laws that denied rights reserved for full citizenship: property laws that forced dependency, voting laws, and laws that governed and monitored their sexual behavior. Since the men of Ruby have effectively replicated this system, if not in actual legal terms then in cultural terms, their violent reaction to their inability to control the women at the Convent indicates just how vital subjugated women are to their notion of male freedom. Coming from slavery, the most emasculating form of servitude, the men of Haven, the narrative indicates, are susceptible to the Western masculine myth. Having the chance to start a town from scratch, the men attempt to reassert their masculinity, first, by going west, but after the “Disallowal,” the desire to prove themselves as men is fully ignited. This ideology of American masculinity is inextricably tied to land/property ownership, so the men of Haven “seal their triumph” of “cutting Haven out of mud” and “monumentaliz[ing] . . . what they had done” by constructing the Oven and forging its inscription (6-7). It is a Faulknerian moment: in *Absalom, Absalom!*, emasculation in part motivates Thomas Sutpen to go west from Virginia and eventually to Mississippi to stake his land and enact his own design. Sutpen is “disallowed” at the front door of a wealthy landowner and it is then that he discovers owning things, land, and having control of others make one’s “arms and legs and bones” superior (Faulkner 229). Like Sutpen, then, men try to control not only the land but the destiny sprouting from it. The forceful myth that the men of Haven construct masks women’s roles in the town’s history; thus, the assertion of masculinity often means silencing the feminine. Since the men of Ruby

claim that the “Old Fathers” founded the town they justify their own power. Additionally, the men ensure their own masculinity: the “new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers” (*Paradise* 6). Eventually, the assertion of masculinity becomes more important than history as Deacon Morgan tries to obscure his grandfather’s slavery. At a town meeting, the men try to determine the meaning of the inscription on the Oven (“beware the furrow of his brow”). Royal Beauchamp believes that the didactic interpretation is a misreading of the inscription. He declares that no ex-slave would want “us to be scared all the time. To ‘beware’ God . . . keep us down” (84). Although Royal’s interpretation actually shows the dignity of the ex-slave by explaining that the latter would not want to characterize God as a slave master, the naming of his grandfather as a slave embarrasses Morgan. In discussing the Oven, Morgan declares, “Nothing was handled more gently than the bricks those men—men, hear me? Not slaves, ex or otherwise—the bricks those men made” (85). He tries to forget slavery as part of his history. Here, the novel draws a distinction between myth and history. Mythmaking often involves exclusion, since myths often dramatize the perception of a homogenous people who share a destiny while history is unquantifiable, and only somewhat measurable, and should involve a cautious reconstruction while recognizing the reconstruction’s limitations. In short, myth is teleological, and the men of Haven and Ruby, because of the scars of slavery, the Disallowal, and continued racism, find in their narrative an exclusionary myth. Indeed, just as Steward Morgan hints to Reverend Misner, the men believe that they are chosen by God. History, though, threatens the myth, as Pat Best discovers as she begins to investigate the genealogy of the

town. Her history uncovers silenced voices incongruent with the town's myth. As Marni Gauthier points out, the Convent itself stands as a monument to silenced peoples:

the mansion was formerly a Catholic school for Indian girls . . . [it] functions as another echo of the nation's suppressed history; the removals and forced assimilations of American Indians. Previously in residence were Indian girls who "whisper[ed] to each other in a language the sister had forbidden them to use," and who "softly s[ang] forbidden Algonquin lullabies." (Gauthier 398)

The outcasts who begin to congregate at the Convent do not fit within the mythical narrative of Ruby; thus, their very existence at the Convent serves as a constant reminder that there is something outside of the myth—other communities, other peoples, perhaps harmless in their own way; in fact, because the women at the Convent are innocuous, this poses even more of a threat because it undermines their need for isolation. As Gauthier also points out, the men's assault on the Convent is an almost inevitable act of violence against those who are seen as a threat to the narrative (398).

Does Morrison abandon myth? Not necessarily. In the next chapter, we will see how Philip Roth savagely deconstructs mythical thinking in his American trilogy. However, Morrison is more interested in deconstructing what she feels are destructive myths but not all myths. In a 1995 interview, Morrison explains that she tries to "stay out of Western mythology;" if there are myths that she deconstructs then they are those of the "Western tradition in order to signal something being askew" (Morrison, *Conversations* 113). In *Paradise*, the problem is not mythical thinking *per se*, but rather the men of Haven and Ruby adopting Western-style myths. As we have seen in *Beloved*, Morrison

finds African myths and folklore useful in order to recover the African traditions that are an important part of American identity. Additionally, *Paradise* places an emphasis on the ritualistic aspect of myth as the women in the Convent engage in ritual as part of a bonding and healing process. Ritual in African traditions tells the individuals that they “matter” and that they “are part of the wider community” (Mbiti 132).

The ritual in the Convent held by Consolata resembles what Mbiti refers to as a type of “Homestead Ritual,” which “are intended to bring about blessings upon the homestead, to remove the impurities of sickness, and to strengthen social ties” (140). Additionally, Morrison is a practicing Catholic, a religion also steeped in ritual. Consolata, interestingly enough, was rescued/taken from Brazil, where African cultural influence is highly visible, by a nun, Mary Magna, who becomes her spiritual guide. Consolata’s race/ethnicity is unknown, but her affair with Deek Morgan suggests that she is black or at least partly black. In researching *Beloved*, Morrison made a trip to Brazil to view artifacts from the slave trade. Plus, since Brazil was one of the largest ports for importing slaves, the Brazilian-African connection would be richly significant. So the evidence suggests that Consolata’s religious-like rituals are a hybrid of African, Brazilian, and Catholic practices.⁵⁸ Additionally, at the beginning of the ritual Consolata announces “Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the mother of Eve” and speaks of “scented cathedrals” (*Paradise* 263). Mythmaking is part of the ritual as Consolata tells stories as the women fall into a trance. After the women are massacred, they, too, become mythical figures in the minds of the women of Ruby when their bodies mysteriously disappear. Although Matus points out that the women are “mythologised [*sic*] amazon warrior

⁵⁸ Jill Matus restricts these practices to “Afro-Brazilian,” but the Catholic upbringing of Consolata is definitely influential as well.

women, honing their amazonian power in preparation of splendid vengeance,” this is only how one woman, Billie Delia, hopes to see them when and if they return (166). Later, we see the women’s mythological presence is peaceful, and they are healers rather than vengeful spirits. Their meaning, Morrison shows, is open to the interpretation of each reader of the myth. The last point is significant because this myth, as opposed to the men of Ruby’s myth, is not a didactically controlling myth, but a myth where no one controls the meanings for others. Matus refers to Morrison’s paradise as a “democratic” one, and so I apply this word to the myth as well (167). Morrison’s myth is a democratic one, hybrid of different races, cultures, and religions, and thus, the most American of myths.

CHAPTER IV

PHILIP ROTH'S AMERICAN TRILOGY: ZUCKERMAN'S PASTORAL ELEGY

"My genius is rebuked"-*MacBeth* (3.1.55)

Philip Roth's American Trilogy in Context

Throughout much of his work, Philip Roth details his struggle with the conflict between his Jewish and American identities. From *The Ghost Writer* (1979) to *Operation Shylock* (1993), Roth's novels are primarily concerned with how a Jewish writer juggles his ethnic identity with his national one—the tension between Jewish tradition and morality and the modernity and splendor (and dangers) of American excess. The subject of the *Zuckerman Bound* novels of the 1980s, thus, is mostly Roth himself—the writer, his world, and his relationship to his art, to his ethnic community, and to his country.⁵⁹ *Operation Shylock*, though not a Zuckerman novel, is yet another self-conscious novel and came at a personally trying time for Roth: in the midst of a failing second marriage and reputed personal breakdown. In a particularly pointed criticism, John Updike wrote in the pages of the *New Yorker* that *Operation Shylock* was Roth's most self-indulgent work, judging that "this cultivation of hypothetic selves," had become "an endgame" for Roth's fiction (Updike, "Recruiting Raw Nerves" 110). "The muse," Updike, concluded, "needs its harness" (110). As Timothy Parrish notes, Roth often "creates his work in antagonistic cooperation with his critics' reading of him," and subsequently since *Shylock* Roth's Zuckerman novels take a decidedly less self-reflective turn (Parrish, "Imagining," 576). In other words, Roth often writes in response to critics' assessments of his work. Roth's novels after *Shylock* are some of the most celebrated in his career: *Sabbath's*

⁵⁹ The *Zuckerman Bound* novels are *The Ghost Writer* (1979), *Zuckerman Unbound* (1981), *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983), and *The Prague Orgy* (1985). These novels are primarily narrated by Roth's literary alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman, who narrates the American trilogy.

Theater (1995) won the National Book Award, and it was followed by the Pulitzer Prize winning *American Pastoral* (1997). Mark Shechner points out that beginning with his American trilogy—*American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist* (1998), *The Human Stain* (2001)—Roth’s works “have been much celebrated for Roth’s turn toward social issues” (142). Shechner, though, remarks that still he thinks that these works, “tell us more about the man than the nation” (142). Indeed, Michael Kimmage’s recent book on the trilogy, *In History’s Grip: Philip Roth’s Newark Trilogy* (2012), examines the trilogy in relationship to Roth and his use of Newark, NJ, its history, its people and values; in fact, Kimmage insists that “Newark trilogy” is a more accurate name than “American trilogy” (3-4). Certainly, Roth’s biography and Newark are vital aspects to understanding the trilogy, but to limit the scope and depth of the novels in such respects would be similar to limiting our understanding of Faulkner’s works to his biography and how Oxford, MS informs his *oeuvre*. In short, Roth’s ambitions are greater and the novels taken as a whole are profound, obsessive examinations of the nature of American identity. Indeed, in this American trilogy, Roth’s alter ego and narrator of the series, Nathan Zuckerman, relates stories of three protagonists and, crucially, their struggles with Americanness. That Roth primarily comes at this problem through the lens of Jewishness is not any more limiting than Updike using the white-male Rabbit as his ticket to America or Morrison explicating American identity through her African American characters. Finally, Roth’s conclusion to this trilogy features Coleman Silk, a black man passing as a white Jew in order to attempt to escape the trappings of racial—and even national—identity. The trilogy’s concern with the role of history, national myth, and the complicated confluence of ethnicity and race as they relate to the construction and consequence of American identity

across four decades of American history distinguish these Zuckerman novels from the novels of *Zuckerman Bound*.

American Pastoral, for example, finds Roth confronting the defining myths of the postwar generation, much like John Updike does throughout the Rabbit tetralogy and Toni Morrison does in her series' culminating novel, *Paradise*. The similarities between *American Pastoral* and the Rabbit tetralogy are striking—too much to be coincidental. Perhaps more of a coincidence is that *American Pastoral*, similar to the nomenclature of Morrison's aforementioned novel, is bookended by sections headed by the word "paradise" (Paradise Remembered, Paradise Lost). Coincidence to be sure, because *Pastoral* was released in 1997 and *Paradise* in 1998, but the fact that both authors explore postwar America ironically as a paradise begs comparison between the two. Both novels feature ethnic minority characters mimicking to their own peril what Roth in *American Pastoral* continually refers to as WASP America. Postwar America as failed paradise is also a theme of *Rabbit, Run* as Rabbit Angstrom finds middle-class domesticity and consumerism as unfulfilling to the needs of his soul. Two common interpretations of Roth's novel have emerged: (1) Swede Levov's tragic fall results from his abandonment of his Jewish identity in favor of the WASP paradigm of American identity and (2) Swede is a victim of history, obviously complicit to a degree, but no more than any other member of, as Roth put it, "the most propagandized" generation in American history (qtd. in Stanley 1). Nevertheless, both critical perspectives agree that Roth sets out to deconstruct American myths. But in doing so, where does that leave American identity? Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky argues that *American Pastoral* insists on the primacy of Jewishness in the American Jewish experience. Mark Shechner, though,

maintains that Jewish fanaticism as demonstrated by Lou, the Swede's father, is actually the definitive influence on Merry's own extremism. However, since both perspectives agree that Roth demythologizes the postwar American narrative, *American Pastoral* complicates any idea of an essential American identity. National identities derive from national myth; without them, the paradigms of national identity, whether these are Jewish American paradigms or WASP paradigms, begin to disintegrate. Indeed, Swede is caught between the two—both paradigms put demands on and expose him to certain risks. Undeniably, Roth implicates the Jewish community's complicity in pushing Swede toward WASPness—it championed him for becoming the ultimate shining example of the assimilated American Jew *because* of his very WASP characteristics. Compare *American Pastoral* to Roth's 1957 short story "Eli the Fanatic." Eli Peck believes that he and his family have easily assimilated into postwar America until he comes face to face with "old world" Judaism—a yeshiva in the middle of his suburban neighborhood. Both Eli and Swede might be seen as abandoning their Jewishness, but really the story and the novel posit Eli and the Swede in the middle of an identity conflict between Americanness and Jewishness. Although Eli attempts to reconnect to his cultural past by donning the garb of the Hasidic Jew, in the end he cannot psychologically sustain the two identities. But Eli and Swede really have no choice in the matter—they are caught in a particular historical moment that offers no real solution, suggesting that the dilemma itself *is* the new identity for American Jews and characterizing American identity not as a static category dictated by paradigms but as a dialectical dynamic.

Roth picks up his trilogy in *I Married a Communist*, detailing the downfall of Ira Ringold, non-practicing Jew, American radio celebrity, and fanatical communist married

to a self-hating Jew, American actress, and fanatical social climber. In this follow-up to *American Pastoral*, Roth deals more directly and savagely with WASP American propaganda and persecution, the obsessive quest to root out un-Americanness through state apparatuses such as the ironically named House Un-American Activities Committee. Set primarily in the late 1940s to the 1950s, *I Married a Communist* examines the fallout of the communist hysteria in the postwar period. Nathan Zuckerman returns as the main narrator. Visiting his elderly mentor Murray Ringold in the 1990s, Nathan learns that he was denied a Fulbright scholarship because of his association with Ira, Murray's younger brother. Ira married the American actress Eve Frame, and because of their tumultuous marriage, she exposes Ira as a communist in a tell-all book. In examining *I Married a Communist*, I revisit Toni Morrison's notion of the spectacle in analyzing Murray Ringold's deconstructive reading of Richard Nixon's 1994 funeral. Roth had written satirically about the Nixon administration in his 1971 book *Our Gang*. In *I Married a Communist*, the pomp and pageantry of the Nixon funeral unfolded on television more as national propaganda than a tribute to Nixon himself. Nixon's corpse is the MacGuffin in the coffin—it doesn't matter who's in there, but it is a chance to perform America, with the national hymns and flag waving and draping that re-solidifies American stability. The media's and politicians' nostalgia for Nixon is really a nostalgia for an illusory America, a story of patriots who sometimes, in the narrative of the funeral, are patriotic to a fault, an illusory America where vigilant citizens once stood up to the un-Americans among them. The spectacle legitimizes corrupt power, the corrupt power of HUAC, McCarthy, and Nixon himself; it identifies "true" Americans because those who do not commune in grief at the altar of the television screen are disrespectful to the

memory of such a devoted countryman. All are forgiven who are part of this narrative, including Nixon's team of crooks who gleefully obeyed his orders. The narrative homogenizes and trumps all counternarratives that go silent amid the televised ritual. Here Roth connects the events of 1950s to the continuation of this sort of American identity and the 1990s—which he will explicate more fully in *The Human Stain*. From the spectacle of the funeral, I explore Roth's engagement with the confluence and divergence of Jewish and American identity. The young Zuckerman mistakenly believes that American identity is new, apart from Jewishness, a separate and singular category that demands the renunciation of all things Jewish. He believes that he can remake himself with the influence of the cultural past—a cultural past that his father and Murray represent. Though, they do not direct Nathan to hold onto at least part of the Jewish character, they do it by the reflective examples they set, in contrast to Ira who mindlessly exchanges identities for others.

Concluding the trilogy is *The Human Stain* in which Roth shows how the persecuting spirit, a demented American national pastime, continues the legacy of McCarthyism. But in the 1990s it is more debased and primitive as it zeroes in on President Bill Clinton and finds its way through the American pastoral of New England to Coleman Silk. In *The Human Stain*, the Monica Lewinsky scandal serves as the backdrop to the ordeal of Coleman Silk, a professor of classics at Athena College. The Puritans may have thought they had wandered into the New Eden and discovered their own biblical American pastoral, but in reality they brought their sins with them, just as Coleman believes he has escaped into a pastoral plane in which he could remake himself, as his exuberance in overhauling the faculty of Athena attests. While calling roll in class

one day, Silk refers to two absent students as spooks. The students, unknown to Coleman, are black, and the charges of racism and sexism begin to fly from the faculty, led by Delphine Roux. In the aftermath, Coleman's wife dies, he leaves the college, and he begins an affair with Faunia Farley, a janitor at the college and part-time dairy worker. She is forty years his junior. Their affair is hampered by Faunia's ex-husband, Vietnam veteran Lester, who suffers from PTSD. Delphine continues her persecution of Coleman by sending him a letter admonishing him for his affair with Faunia. But Coleman's biggest secret is that he is a black man who has passed as a white Jew for more than forty years. The spectacle of the narrative plays out on the national stage through the Clinton scandal and pervades into the far reaches of rural America into Coleman's life. While Zuckerman ponders whether or not Coleman had actually pulled off the fantasy of self-creation, the narrative is undermined by Coleman's inexplicable utterance of the word "spook" that comes to haunt him throughout the novel. Additionally, as Zuckerman meshes the facts of Coleman's life with his own musings, it becomes clearer that Coleman's supposed self-fashioning is an illusion. Characters in the *The Human Stain* are thwarted by historical forces: Lester Farley by Vietnam, Faunia by her foray into the most abusive places of the American domestic realm, and Coleman by his attempt to escape the social and political forces that are determined to have a say in his identity. In the backdrop, is the American pastoral, a delusion of Farley, and of Zuckerman, who realizes that his five years in isolation are over—there is nowhere to retreat to escape the American berserk. It is no coincidence that Zuckerman returns to the city in Roth's 2007 novel *Exit Ghost*.

American Pastoral: The Price of Myth

I want to begin this discussion of *American Pastoral* (1997) as it relates to American identity by comparing the novel directly to John Updike's *Rabbit Redux* (1971) and other aspects of the Rabbit tetralogy and to Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998). This will help clarify how Roth engages with myth and its relationship to American identity. As previously mentioned, there is evidence to suggest that Updike's review of *Operation Shylock* indirectly led to the turn Roth's fiction took with the onset of the American trilogy. But even with the more anecdotal evidence aside, the similarities between *American Pastoral* and *Rabbit Redux* are striking. Both include the struggle of the male protagonists to come to terms with the social upheaval of the 1960s exacerbated by the Vietnam War. Oddly, the novels' many similarities have gone unnoticed by critics. Like John Updike's male protagonist Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, Philip Roth's protagonist, Seymour "the Swede" Levov, is a former star high school athlete whose seemingly idyllic family life unravels at the height of the 1960s. Swede Levov's troubles begin when his sixteen-year old daughter Merry bombs a post office in the small-town of Old Rimrock, NJ, killing a local doctor. Swede was once the pride of the Newark Jewish community, a symbol of successful Jewish assimilation into America in the aftermath of the US's victory in World War II. Like Rabbit Angstrom, Swede had been a star athlete in high school, and he runs a successful business while being married to the love of his life, Dawn Dwyer, a former Miss New Jersey. Swede is more successful than Rabbit since Rabbit's life is not idyllic, but in the ten years between *Run* and *Redux* Rabbit has at least settled into a reserved, blue collar class contentment. Nominally, Roth relates the Swede to his literary forebear. Although Levov is Jewish, his nickname "the Swede" links the

character to Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom’s own Swedish surname. Additionally, several other characters in *American Pastoral* serve as cognates to characters in the *Rabbit* tetralogy. For example, in *Rabbit Redux* and *American Pastoral* are the tragedies of Jill and Merry, respectively, both teenage girls who run away from privileged middle class families, join the counterculture and meet with horrific ends.

The comparison is instructive because despite plot and character similarities, Roth’s technique is decidedly different from Updike’s. True, Skeeter serves as the demythologizing agent for Rabbit, but Updike’s use of myth in his fiction underscores the importance of its function, though as *Redux* indicates, myths can obscure reality and history. Roth, then, goes one step further. Specifically, Roth’s novel serves as a response to earlier Updike’s cathartic rendering of the 1960s. Thus, Roth’s wrath is limited not to demythologizing the American postwar myth, but to any myth that lends itself to idealization. A humorless, dark, and depressing novel, *American Pastoral* presents a bleak picture of America and its failure to deliver on its promise of the postwar American dream. Although *Rabbit Redux* gives a grim overview of increasing crime, drug use, and social deterioration, Updike’s novel is surprisingly less pessimistic and more forgiving. While Updike was and remained critical of many aspects of the Sixties’ movements, *Rabbit Redux* is a novel about redemption and restoration. Consequently, *American Pastoral* paints a darker picture of the consequences of the younger Sixties’ generation as well as Swede’s. While Updike ultimately restores Rabbit through his eventual ambivalence toward the Vietnam War (he at least begins to question it), his new appreciation of his wife, and his recognition of racism, Roth portrays the Swede and his family as victims of a misguided and out of control society.

In a 1981 interview, Roth was asked to assess the sixties; he replied:

I have no judgment to make of something so colossal as ten years of world history. As an American citizen I was appalled and mortified by the war in Vietnam, frightened by the urban violence, sickened by the assassinations, confused by the student uprisings, sympathetic to the libertarian pressure groups, delighted by the theatricality, disheartened by the rhetoric of the causes, excited by the sexual display, and enlivened by the general air of confrontation and change. (*Conversations*, 124)

By 1997, however, Roth was ready to make that judgment. Though in an earlier interview Roth credits the 1960s with demythologizing the idealized myth of American exceptionalism, he later characterizes the Sixties' movements as "insidious" and "demonic" that would "not give an inch in behalf of that idealized mythology" (*Reading Myself* 90). *American Pastoral*, in turn, attempts to demythologize the idealized myth of sixties' social progression. Indeed, the novel portrays much of middle-class America's fascination with the counterculture as infantile, obsessing over sex, tearing down the previous generation, and displaying empty intellectualism rather than any sincere, dedicated attempt at social progress. In his autobiography *The Facts* (1988) and his ode to his father, *Patrimony* (1991), for example, Roth laments the deterioration of the Newark neighborhood of his youth, more than once referring to the presumably unemployed black men who roam there; in *American Pastoral*, the Swede echoes these sentiments as he tells Zuckerman how Newark has disintegrated into black slums (in *American Pastoral*, Rita Cohen insists the slums exist because of capitalistic exploitation) (Roth, *The Facts* 16; *Patrimony* 22). In demythologizing the 1960s through *American*

Pastoral, Roth challenges Updike's accommodation of the 60s myth in *Rabbit Redux* and Updike's mythical, cathartic approach.

American Pastoral, however, resists mythmaking and attacks the myth of social progress through catharsis that *Rabbit Redux* espouses. Roth rejects myth, and sees the degradation of Merry, Swede's daughter, as only tragic. As other characters such as Nathan Zuckerman, the novel's narrator, and Jerry, Swede's brother, seek explanations for Merry's rejection of her father, the novel—and even Zuckerman—portrays these attempts as empty exercises in mythmaking that cannot make sense or give a reason for Swede's tragic life. Therefore, Roth seeks to demythologize Updike's cathartic myth because it provides justification for the aspects of Sixties' culture and hypocrisy that Roth finds demonic and reprehensible. Thus, to reject myth, Roth cannot limit himself to reject only the postwar myth but also the myth of 1960s radicals and their sympathetic chroniclers.

Why might Roth see the latter as mythic? David Farber notes that as the debate about the Vietnam War dissipated, social conservatives remained passionate and insistent that the real damage the sixties' culture inflicted was on traditional American families (Farber 169). Let's be clear: Roth is no conservative in the Republican sense; but such social and political conservatism was not exclusive to right wing ideology; laws favoring censorship of supposedly offensive material met with bipartisan support. The historian Richard Hofstadter once referred to the 1960s as "The Age of Rubbish" (qtd. in Mann 1). Consequently, with the dawn of the Reagan Era strong currents of political and social conservatism pervaded American culture propagated by an array of socially conservative organizations and factions that pointed to the degradation of the nuclear family as a main

cause of society's ills. One of the primary targets of conservatives was the legacy of the 1960s counterculture (Farber 169). Critics such as Sandra Stanley have aligned *American Pastoral* with this stream of social conservatism that seeks to revise the legacy of the 1960s. Stanley argues that "Roth pits Swede Levov as a true believer in 'the benign national myth'" of the World War II generation "against his sixteen-year-old daughter Merry, a militant radical who articulates what Roth describes as the 'counterpastoral' impulse," this "demonic reality" (1-2). Encapsulating this struggle in Zuckerman's narrative, Roth assaults and challenges historical metanarratives propagated by liberal intellectuals who romanticize the contributions of middle-class Americans to the socially progressive and antiwar movements. The conservatism of *American Pastoral* is mainly social, but it is also politically conservative because it disavows the revolutionary and violent veins of the antiwar movement. Roth shared equally with sixties' liberals the hatred of Richard Nixon and all things Republican, as well as the disenchantment with Lyndon Johnson. However, *American Pastoral* expresses bewilderment at the rage of white, middle-class, educated, and privileged Americans directed not always at political figures, but rather at the previous generation who had fought in World War II and whose work ethic provided the subsequent generation with the privileges they threw back in their faces with revulsion. *American Pastoral*, then, serves not so much as a defense of the 1950s, but rather a scathing critique of many of the Sixties' activists' condescension toward a generation who—from the novel's perspective—valued family, hard work, craftsmanship, and sacrifice with the hope of providing a better life and opportunities for their children. In examining the cause for Merry's left-wing militancy, Roth's novel, Stanley claims, is "the existential realization of the moral and political style of the sixties

bourgeois intellectual” (184). Merry, then, is the “perfect embodiment” of the “infantile leftist radicals who turn against their overly indulgent parents, and naively spout politically radical creeds and succumb to their own fascination with violence” (Stanley 184). *American Pastoral* attempts to demythologize any pretentious assertion that the sixties’ generation was superior to the one that preceded it: “[Swede] heard them laughing, the Weathermen, the Panthers, the angry ragtag army of the violent Uncorrupted who called him a criminal and hated his guts because he was one of those who own and have” (*American Pastoral* 257). For example, at Swede’s dinner party, Lou, Swede’s father, and the other guests, primarily liberal Columbia professor Marcia Umanoff, argue over the conflicting values between Lou’s generation and the current one. The novel shows Marcia as a typical, snide academician whose views and politics ignore or are indifferent to the realities of life:

The privileged place in Marcia’s feelings went to the Vietnamese—the North Vietnamese. She never for a moment compromised her political convictions or compassionate comprehension of international affairs, not even when she saw from six inches away the misery that had befallen her husband’s oldest friend. (342)

The dinner conversation with Lou reinforces this view of Marcia when the conversation devolves into an argument about pornography. Calling pornography trash, Lou then equates pornography to other dimensions of social decay: crime; breakdown of education; and overall urban filth of unclean streets, fires, poverty, and drugs. Marcia claims that wanting to see pornography is “human nature,” a point that Lou rejects (347). In fact, Lou criticizes the idea that pornography is anything to be fascinated with:

These goddamn movies? Well of course, they're not new either you know. . . . Well, I hate to tell you but he [Abe] had all these kinds of movies right in his house...The two of us played gin for an hour, until there was this hullabaloo in the living room. . . and to this day I remember sitting with Al Haberman playing cards while the rest of them were drooling like idiots in the living room. (347)

To Lou, pornography is not about human nature, but about immaturity and irresponsibility, and he questions any social need to make pornography so readily available to children. Lou does not argue pornography's legality but rather its cultural value, nor does he understand the big deal. Significantly, the argument revolves around pornography more than any of the other issues that Lou has brought up, such as racism and unemployment, suggesting that the counterculture was more about sexual promiscuity than anything else. The text reinforces this position by having the conversation take place at a dinner party at which Swede discovers that Dawn, Swede's wife, has been having an affair with Bill Orcutt. Furthermore, Marcia's cavalier attitude about the effects of pornography on children and society reflects the novel's portrayal of her overall view. Dawn suspects that Marcia may have encouraged Merry, and even if she did not, that she was at least "altogether pleased about what Merry was alleged to have done" (342). Although Zuckerman writes that Dawn was mistaken about Marcia harboring Merry, he confirms Marcia's intellectual vacuity: "*Marcia was all talk—always had been: senseless, ostentatious talk . . . words expressing little more than Marcia's intellectual vanity and her odd belief that all her posturing added up to an independent mind*" (343).

In the novel's final moments, Bill Orcutt's wife, Jessie, stabs Lou near the eye with a fork. Marshall Bruce Gentry argues that overbearing patriarchy as handed down by Lou's generation has resulted in Merry's rebellion. He states that Jessie's assault symbolizes the women of the novel's attack on patriarchy. However, Gentry overlooks the point that it is the *drunken* Jessie Orcutt who delivers the blow. Jessie is not just a victim of "deep American misogyny," represented by Lou's generation, but also a victim of the sexual permissiveness that leads Bill to cheat on her with Dawn (Gentry 15). Jessie's drunkenness demonstrates her impaired judgment; she is stabbing at the wrong person. Jessie's blind and drunken rage represents the misdirected anger at Lou's generation while Marcia's laughing reaction at this act of violence represents her nihilistic view that any act that tears down the previous generation is enjoyable to watch. Although Roth shows that Dawn's assumptions about Marcia's involvement in Merry's disappearance are not accurate, Marcia's reaction to Lou's stabbing that supports Dawn's assessment of her nihilism is. Dawn tells Swede that Marcia only supports antiwar priests because "they are doing something that *taints* the Church. Because they are doing something *outside* the church. . . . That these priests are an affront to everything that people like me grew up with, *that's* what she likes" (343). In this last episode, Roth attacks the hypocrisy of those who claimed they were against the violence in Vietnam and yet supported or were indifferent to acts of violence at home. Nevertheless, the novel's ending indicates that the legacy of the 1960s is not totally about the war but rather about transgressing and breaking down sexual mores.

The emphasis on sex at the end of *American Pastoral* is similar in theme to John Updike's ending of *Rabbit Redux* where Janice teases Rabbit about his prudish behavior.

Rabbit Redux treats sex more refreshingly than does *American Pastoral*. Rabbit, like Lou, is concerned about the openness of everyone's sex life: "But all this fucking, everybody fucking, I don't know, it just makes me too sad. It's what makes everything so hard to run" (*Redux* 346). Janice responds that "Human things," like sex, make life run and asks him, "When're you going to grow up?" (346). Rabbit indeed comes off as ridiculous in this final scene, trying to make sure that the hotel clerk knows that they are married. For Janice, maturity lies not in repressing sexual instinct and enjoyment but embracing it as part of being human. Janice has discovered that sexual drive and intimacy make "things"—love, marriage, life—run. In *American Pastoral*, however, neither Dawn's or Swede's affairs have such rejuvenating powers. In fact, sex lacks the creative and refreshing powers it has in *Rabbit Redux*; it is a destructive and even sterile force that has lost its generative and vital qualities. Dawn's affair marks the end of the marriage, not its renewal, and Swede's affair with Sheila comes during his darkest hour. Zuckerman himself tells Jerry that his sex life is over, which appears to color his attitude toward sex's role in the novel. Zuckerman imagines Lou becoming angry when he learns of Jerry's latest divorce. In this recreation, Lou accuses Jerry of making all these kids and yet destroying homes in the process. Additionally, Zuckerman offers that one of the reasons Merry became a bomber was a result of an incestuous moment between her and Swede. From this point on, Merry is continually victimized sexually, having been raped multiple times. Interestingly, both Updike and Roth share a perspective toward the consequences of the sixties' attitude toward sex. Rabbit tells Jill, "You have no juice, baby. You're all sucked out and you're just eighteen. You've tried everything and you're not scared of nothing and you wonder why it's all so dead" (*Rabbit Redux* 104). But

Updike, thus, distinguishes between the role of sex in Janice's replenishment and Jill's degradation. Janice finds sex rewarding because she and Charlie love and respect one another while for Jill it has become a task, a way for paying Rabbit and Skeeter for what they give her. Sex and adultery, thus, are presented in *Rabbit Redux* as not necessarily acts of shameless indulgence and betrayal but rather as complicated facets of the human condition. In contrast, *American Pastoral* allows for no such nuance. The celebration of sexual freedom in Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1970) is gone. Sex in this generation has become in *American Pastoral* a destructive force.

As Michael Kimmage points out, "In the Newark trilogy, 1960s radicalism . . . [is] generic only in [its] capacity to cause harm" (97). *American Pastoral* does not engage too much with the accomplishments of the 1960s' activists: the prolonged resistance to the war that Roth himself detested was a significant factor in bringing US involvement to a close and the Civil Rights Movement brought sweeping legislative changes. Instead, as mentioned earlier, *American Pastoral* dwells on many of the negative aspects of the decade; the social reality of the 1960s aftermath saw the further deterioration of urban America, especially Newark as it dissolved into a cesspool of poverty, crime, and corruption (Kimmage 32). Roth, though, does not lay this all at the feet of the 1960s; white flight had begun decades before. But in *American Pastoral*, all mythmaking is ripe for critique, and the alleged social degradation as a result of the "demonic" ideology that would not give an inch or recognize its own hypocrisy becomes a focus of the novel.

While both Roth and Toni Morrison directly attack WASP American myths, Morrison does not eschew myth totally. Morrison throughout her trilogy relies heavily on African myth, encouraging her readers to rediscover African presence in American

culture and history. The ending of *Paradise*, for example, sets up the slain women as mythic figures whose bodies vanish and whose spirits benignly haunt the town of Ruby. Second, within the Convent, the women practice rituals and are looking to heal themselves through religious incantation. A practicing Catholic, Morrison, like Updike, sees the power and usefulness of myth while at the same time recognizing the dangers of mythical thinking. Morrison's Catholicism, which has rarely been critically discussed, helps explain the emphasis on the healing power of ritual and myth; however, the same cannot be said for Roth and Judaism in regard to *American Pastoral*. Roth's critique of mythical thinking destabilizes the idea of American identity because it renders history as a collection of fragmented events that are resistant to teleological exegesis. A collective identity, such as national, religious, or ethnic, is held together by a shared hermeneutical approach to historical events by hegemonic narratives, but the fabric of a collective identity begins to tear apart when the interpretation of history becomes stratified and perpetually reductive. Such is the case with *American Pastoral* as Zuckerman and Jerry Levov⁶⁰ attempt to interpret the Swede's history in order to find the reason for his tragic life. Indeed, Zuckerman's approaches and versions vary and in the end he questions his own interpretive approach to understanding Swede's downfall.

Despite Roth's savage critique of 1960s radicalism, *American Pastoral* is no hagiography of the postwar generation. Nor does the novel, as many critics suggest, imply a punishment for Swede for trading his Jewishness for WASPness. Swede, as Zuckerman declares, is instead fettered to history—a character caught in particular historical convergences of changing cultural signs and meanings. National and ethnic

⁶⁰ Jerry is Swede's younger brother. Jealous of Swede's life, Jerry takes pleasure in blaming Swede for Merry's act of terrorism.

identities are in the midst of a critical flux, especially within the Jewish American community at the end of World War II. Rather than attack Swede for abandoning his Jewishness, a charge that was leveled persistently at Roth himself for years, Roth deconstructs the notions of essentialism in both Jewish and American identity. However, Roth does not repudiate Jewishness, but instead ironically comes at this deconstruction from what might be said to be a Jewish point of view. For example, in *Being Jewish in America*, Arthur Hertzberg argues that Jews having been treated as foreigners and alien in other lands throughout their history have had to guard against notions of essentialism that threatened their very existence (85). Since *American Pastoral* never makes clear what authentic Jewishness looks like, it seems unreasonable to conclude that a return to some core Jewishness is what it advocates. As Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky argues, the only “authentic condition of contemporary or postmodern Jews is freedom . . . to create themselves as Jews” in “whatever way they wish” (89-90). For Rubin-Dorsky, though, Swede fails for precisely the reason that he wants only freedom and not the Jewishness. Rather create himself as a Jew, the Swede creates himself as a WASP “bereft of a cultural foundation, a spiritual heritage, a historical community, and even an intellectual tradition” (Rubin-Dorsky 100). However, whatever criticisms that are leveled at WASPs, the litany just relayed inaccurately describes them. Critics such as Rubin-Dorsky put a large amount of stock in the rantings of Swede’s brother Jerry who excoriates Swede for “playing at being WASPs” (*American Pastoral* 280). But this seems to justify Jerry’s slur against Dawn, whom he calls “a little Mick girl,” and to admonish intermarriage, as if Jews should practice the kind of isolationism of the Ruby men in *Paradise* (280). Second, Rubin-Dorsky states that both Swede and Dawn are being punished for not “creating

authentic Jewish lives”—as if Dawn should have adhered to Lou’s demands⁶¹ and abandoned her Catholicism since only living a Jewish life would have avoided this tragedy and as if somehow authentic Jews cannot have terrible things happen to them (100). Simply put, why not an authentic Catholic life? In fact, Lou only acts the part of a strict Jew in order to try to stop Swede from marrying Dawn.

Roth, instead, rejects the idea that only an authentic Jewish identity would have averted the tragedy. Rubin-Dorsky mentions that Swede is a “Job-type” (100); although he leaves this topic, it’s worth expanding because the Job analogy is important. First, *American Pastoral* asks the same basic question as the *Book of Job*: why do bad things happen to good people? Second, the *Book of Job* represents Jewish thought that contrasts sharply with certain beliefs that held that God’s favor could easily be ascertained by the fortunes of individuals (Updike critiques this notion as well, as previously observed). *Job*, in fact, also engages myth by illuminating the limits of human understanding: God is not narratively mythical in the sense that a clear ideology or system of belief is laid out—God’s will cannot be discerned. In fact, Zuckerman notices that one of the Swede’s books is *The Kid from Tomkinsville* about a baseball player who suffers a series of setbacks but continues to persevere; Zuckerman refers to it as “the boys’ Book of Job” (*American Pastoral* 9). He further remarks that “I thought of the Swede and the Kid as one” and asks himself if the book is “a book about a sweet star savagely and unjustly punished—a book about a greatly gifted innocent whose worst fault is a tendency to keep his right shoulder down and swing up but whom the thundering heavens destroy nonetheless” (9). In the book is also a “reprehensible member” of the team named Razzie Nugent who is a “hothead, a violent bully fiercely jealous of the Kid” (9). Zuckerman links Razzie to

⁶¹ Lou, Swede’s father, tries to stop Swede from marrying Dawn because she is Catholic.

Jerry: Jerry, Zuckerman describes, is “scrawny,” a “licorice stick” with explosive aggression that exceeds the Swede’s (9). As a kid Jerry takes out his frustration of being the Swede’s little brother by playing violent games of Ping-Pong, hitting the ball so hard that “murder couldn’t have been far from his mind” (6). Razzie is also described as scrawny and drawn in a “blackish, ink-heavy rendering” similar to the image of Jerry as a stick of licorice (9). Jerry functions as one of Swede’s accusers just as Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar are Job’s accusers who insist that Job has brought his misery upon himself and who were jealous of Job. Zuckerman plays the role of Elihu, Job’s sensible friend, portraying Jerry as an extreme narcissist. In his reaction to Jerry’s first few words to him, Zuckerman observes:

These few sentences telling me what I was, what *everything* was, would have accounted not merely for four wives but for eight, ten, sixteen of them. Everyone’s narcissism is strong at a reunion, but this was an outpouring of another magnitude. Jerry’s body may have been divided between the skinny kid and large man but not the character—he had the character of one big unified thing, coldly accustomed to being listened to.

(61)

Referring to Jerry, Zuckerman derisively marvels at this “savagely sure-of-himself man” (61). Zuckerman has Swede interpret Jerry’s tirade as nothing more than a rant—“Jerry’s grand occasion to tell him the truth”—and he asks himself, “Why does someone in the midst of your worse suffering, decide the time has come to drive home, disguised in the form of character analysis all the contempt they have been harboring for you all these years?” (276). Zuckerman’s antipathy for Jerry, then, suggests his sympathy is with

Swede. Furthermore, neither Jerry nor the novel offers an alternate path for Swede. What does either offer that distinguishes the Jewish lifestyle from the WASP? Jerry possesses the shallowness he accuses Dawn of having, trading off each wife for a younger one: “Jerry’s been married four times,” Swede tells Zuckerman, “His new one’s in her thirties. Half his age. Jerry’s the doctor that marries the nurse” (37). It is not said whether or not all or any of his wives are even Jewish. Zuckerman imagines Lou becoming angry when he learns of Jerry’s latest divorce. In this recreation, Lou accuses Jerry of making all these kids and yet destroying homes in the process.

Thus, faulting Swede’s estrangement from his Jewish heritage appears to be more of a red herring, a convenient way to find meaning in why Merry became a bomber and why Swede suffered this tragedy. In the waning moments of the novel Zuckerman has Swede also come to this conclusion, as he thinks, “He should have listened to his father and never married her. He had defied him just that one time, but that was all it had taken—that did it” (385). However, Swede comes to this conclusion in anger, just after he discovers that his wife has cheated on him. In the adulterous Dawn, Swede finds his scapegoat, but these thoughts are short-lived. The more he thinks about Dawn, he remembers her as courageous going before his father and being interrogated about her religion and her family. Furthermore, Jerry’s insistence that Swede paid for wanting to be WASP contradicts other criticisms of his brother. On one hand Jerry blames Swede for playing it safe, for not wanting to disappoint anyone; however, he then blames Swede for not listening to Lou and marrying Dawn anyway. Swede becomes confused about what kind of life he was supposed to lead that would have averted the tragedy. When Jerry tells him that Swede wanted to live like a WASP, Swede does not understand him. The WASP

lifestyle and the Jewish lifestyle have become indistinguishable in many ways—there is nothing that makes Jerry’s Jewish materialism and vanity any more pure than Dawn’s. In Zuckerman’s speech that he never gave at his class reunion, he writes that there was a belief in the idea of the American dream. Jews had not been immune to the appeal of the American myth in which Swede becomes caught up. Already a not so “slight shift between” his and Swede’s generation and Lou’s had occurred (41). This new generation, his and Swede’s, was being encouraged in the afterglow of the end of the Great Depression and America’s victory in World War II to go and “*Make something of yourselves*” and were being “steered in the direction of success” (41). His and Swede’s generation began to see the lines between Jewishness and Americanness as being blurred. As Americans, they were to start over again, en masse, “everyone in it together” (40). Because Swede was a victim of this propaganda, all lines of blame being drawn to him lead nowhere. In Zuckerman’s own desperation to think of something plausible that might explain the tragedy that befalls his childhood hero, he imagines Swede in an incestuous moment kissing his daughter. However, Zuckerman leaves this, indicating even an act such as that could not explain Merry’s violence.

To find fault singularly with Swede and his choices is to miss the point of Zuckerman’s observation that he was “fettered to history, an *instrument* of history” (*American Pastoral* 5). Since Swede is an instrument of history, his personal responsibility is heavily mitigated. As Zuckerman relays, it was the Jewish community that propped the Swede up as emblematic of their own desire to assimilate into American culture: “through the Swede, the neighborhood entered into a fantasy about itself and about the world, the fantasy of sports fans everywhere: almost like Gentiles (as they

imagined Gentiles)” (*American Pastoral* 4). Gary Johnson writes that Swede functions allegorically, the personification of

Jewish-American assimilation, the product of [quoting Zuckerman] ‘each new generation’s breaking away from the parochialism a little further, out for the desire to go the limit in America with your rights, forming yourself as an ideal person who gets rid of the traditional Jewish habits and attitudes, who frees himself of the pre-America insecurities and the old, constraining obsessions so as to live unapologetically as an equal among equals.’ (G. Johnson 240; *American Pastoral* 85).

The Jewish community praises Swede not for embodying authentic Jewishness but for escaping the Old World Jewish mentality and entering into Americanness by virtue of his looks (“the insentient Viking mask of this blue-eyed blond born into our tribe” [*American Pastoral* 3]) and his athletic prowess. Zuckerman notes that Jews valued “advanced degrees” instead of “[p]hysical aggression . . . camouflaged by athletic uniforms” (*American Pastoral* 3). Consequently, Swede becomes a mythic figure for the community to help allay fears and become “a repository for all their hopes,” a symbol of a Jewish and American alliance needed to defeat the Nazis, the ultimate killers and persecutors of Jews (4). The community begins to mythologize Swede, and Zuckerman compares him to a god. More precisely, Swede begins to resemble a golem, a magical creature of Jewish myth created to protect Jews from persecution. The word golem appears in the *Talmud* and in *Psalms*, meaning a shapeless, yet pliable mass (Weiner 51). The golem, according to Cathy Gelbin, was part of Jewish folklore necessary to the forming of modern Jewish identity, or more specifically, the golem signifies the “changing configurations of

Jewishness beyond ... Jewish traditionalism” (Gelbin 7). Furthermore, Gelbin argues that the golem is the embodiment of the “discourse of the assimilated Jew” and “trigger[s] the inadvertent collapse of the essentializing cultural and ethnic discourses it is meant to signify” (7). Finally, Gelbin points out that the golem marks the return of the repressed as theorized by Julia Kristeva, and thus the golem is “the ambivalent border where exact limits between same and other, subject and object disappear” (qtd. in Gelbin 4). Indeed, the Swede is where “Conflicting Jewish desires awakened by the sight of him were simultaneously becalmed by him; the contradiction in Jews who want to fit in and want to stand out, who insist they are different and insist they are no different. . . . Where was the Jew in him?” (*American Pastoral* 20). Swede embodied for the community the disappearance of the definitive markers between Jewishness and Americanness. Furthermore, according to Jewish folklore, the golem is physically powerful but unintelligent, created only for the purpose of defense. Interestingly then, Zuckerman attributes the change in Jewish values from the cerebral to the physical since Swede possessed the kind of physical aggression needed to defeat the Germans. In the Swede’s room, Zuckerman as a boy discovers that Swede’s books are all about athletes but are flanked by “a bar mitzvah gift, miniaturized replicas of Rodin’s ‘The Thinker’”—representing the contrast in traditional Jewish values and the American books about physically strong and aggressive characters (7). Second, to bring a golem to life, the creator(s) would dance around it and chant the name of God (Wigoder 512). Zuckerman explains that during football games “at the peak of frenzied adoration, an explosion of skirt-billowing cartwheels was ecstatically discharged” as cheerleaders “flickered like fireworks” in a kind of ritualistic dance then chanted “Swede Levov! It rhymes with ‘The

Love’.” (*American Pastoral* 7) Love is an alternate way of invoking God; Swede’s name, Zuckerman tells us, was “magical” (1). Swede “provided a bizarre, delusionary kind of sustenance, the happy release into a Swedean innocence, for those who lived in dread of never seeing their sons or their brothers or their husbands again”; he was “embraced as a symbol of hope” (4, 5). Therefore, the life that Swede leads, the faint Jewishness “he wore so lightly” (which Zuckerman admits was idolized along with his “oneness with America”) was incubated by the Jewish community itself (7). The golem was pliable for its creators, and Swede was, as Jerry continually insists, anything that anyone wanted him to be.

If the golem represents a return of the repressed, then what is repressed? There is the fear among Jews of losing authenticity, and since the golem represents the breakdown of cultural essence and difference, the drama of the Swede catalyzes the worst of Jewish anxieties. First, Swede’s physical appearance may make him indistinguishable as a Jew, but even more terrifying subconsciously for Jews is that the Swede is “blue-eyed and blond” and “startlingly Aryan” (3,10). Horribly for Jews, then, is that Swede resembles Hitler’s version of the master race and their horror is further exacerbated by Swede’s athletic superiority to other Jews—and they love him for it. Zuckerman says that the Levovs “bestowed” the Swede upon the community (10). Lou, the Swede’s father, is an authoritarian Jewish father who stands as the personification of the traditional Jew. The last name of Levov is a derivation of *Loew* or *Löw*—the name of the priest who created the golem to defend Jews from anti-Semitic attacks during the sixteenth century; it is the most well known and documented of the Jewish golem folk tales (Kieval 3). But as much as the golem was a protector of Jews, the golem was also a kind of monster, one that

could get out of control from its creator and wreak havoc. The golem often helped his creator perform menial tasks as a kind of servant; Swede, at the insistence of Lou, gives up a chance to play professional baseball in order to learn his father's glove-making business. Lou forces Swede to work in the tanner, the worst part of the glove making process. Swede, Jerry tells Zuckerman, does everything his father demands—until he defies Lou by marrying Dawn Dwyer, a Catholic. In versions of the golem tale, the fear was that the golem would be used against the Jews by anti-Semites or fall in love with a *shiksa*, or Gentile woman. Thus, the creation of the golem had an air of transgression⁶² about it (a kind of Jewish Creature of Frankenstein, according to Gelbin), and pieced together from these fragmented tales is the anxiety of this Jewish creature being lured into the Gentile culture around it—and deeper still is the fear that Jews themselves would become fully assimilated and lose their authentic Jewishness. Indeed, Jerry refers to Dawn as a *shiksa* and lays much of the blame for Swede's assimilation on her superficiality. The *shiksa*, Frederic Jaher observes, is seen as a “threat to the survival of Judaism” (518). Additionally, Rubin-Dorsky notes that “Jewish boys lay claim to America by possessing the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Christian woman” (Rubin-Dorsky, “Shiksa Goddess” 38). Rubin-Dorsky quotes from Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* as Portnoy declares, “O America! It may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me . . . America is a *shikse* nestling under your arm whispering love, love, love, love, love” (38). And it's their union, the golem and the *shiksa*, from which Merry the monster is produced.

⁶² Whether or not creating a golem is viewed as transgressive is debatable. Some assert that only Christian interpretation or influence characterizes the creation of the golem as transgressive against God.

At least, that's how this mythic narrative goes. Since myth is a controlling narrative, it explains why things happen and ingrains a schema for behavior. Myths bring order to chaos and give the inexplicable purpose within the cultural psyche. Myths can be didactic, providing morals to be learned, and here the myth of the Jew marrying the Gentile seems the cautionary tale, the risk one takes in forsaking one's authentic culture. Zuckerman, though, seems to be dramatizing Jewish anxieties not to pass on the moral but to deconstruct the myth of the assimilating Jew. When tragedy strikes, people seize explanations, often resorting not to the intricate specifics, but rather they cling to the controlling narrative that reinforces their cultural schema. Merry's bombing then serves as the perfect catalyst for Jews to explain why this happened to the Swede. Jerry and Rita Cohen, who is the Marxist voice, serve as these very mouthpieces for varying explanations. Scholars have offered similar versions of both Jerry's and Rita's perspectives. But as discussed earlier, Zuckerman undermines Jerry's and Rita's versions. First, scholars seem to overlook that much of what we know about Swede comes from Zuckerman's recreation of events. Much of what is said by Jerry and Rita is taken for granted, especially their descriptions of Swede, Dawn, and Merry. However, Zuckerman's reconstructed narrative is an exercise in the demythification of Swede's life, to understand who the Swede is beyond the myth and to understand him as an individual rather than an allegory for Jewish assimilation anxieties.

A writer, Zuckerman cannot resist the temptation to seek answers; the question of why persists throughout the narrative. After the Swede sends Zuckerman a letter wanting him to help write about his father, Zuckerman, unaware of Merry's bombing at this point, believes that Swede really wants to talk about some shock he's had in his own life. But

when the Swede does not meet his expectations, Zuckerman concludes that the Swede was “all about being looked at” and that he (Zuckerman) was “craving depths” in his childhood hero “that don’t exist;” however, he admits: “I was wrong. Never more mistaken about anyone in my life” (*American Pastoral* 39). The trap that Roth/Zuckerman has set up is to introduce each of the primary characters into a type: Swede, the prodigal Jew; Dawn, narcissist Christian beauty queen; and Merry, the monstrosity they create. With supporting testimony from Jerry and Rita, other characters, and sometimes Zuckerman himself, these types are reinforced. However, as Zuckerman’s narrative of Swede’s life proceeds he begins to hammer away at the statues that have been presented in order to reveal the complexities of each individual. People live lives that may seem simplistic, as a moral for our own sense of security and our own self-righteousness, and we may interpret these lives allegorically, but Zuckerman sees his duty as a writer to provide Swede with the dignity of living a “real” life. Zuckerman writes that he “dreamed a realistic chronicle. I began gazing into his life—not his life as a god or demigod in whose triumphs one could exult as a boy but his life as another assailable man” (89).

Critics, for example, consistently accept not only Jerry’s version of events but also the Marxist line that Rita Cohen lays out in her confrontations with the Swede. For example, Timothy Parrish asserts that Swede exploits both his black and Puerto Rican workers at the Levov glove factory. However, Roth anticipates this reading. First, the Marxist clichés that Rita throws out are heavy-handed and obvious. Swede, however, defends himself, countering that Rita has no idea what she is talking about. The glove factory was moved not to cut down on labor costs, but because of the degradation of

social conditions in Newark. It is easy for someone as detached as Rita is from the factory to make generalized assumptions for what goes on in the business, but her knowledge is limited to academic theories and a brief tour of the glove making factory. Second, the workers do not, at first, feel exploited—like the Swede, they are just making a living. Third, Swede is commended for keeping the factory in Newark despite the social unrest of the late 1960s. What alternatives are there for either Swede or the workers? Neither Rita nor Merry has one. They have theories but no practical alternatives. Moreover, Rita's charges against Dawn's parenting are also contested by the Swede—Zuckerman gives us no reason why we should trust Rita's version of the business or Merry's domestic life over Swede's. Rita herself is an exploiter by using Merry in order to extort money from her father.

In fact, through Zuckerman's narrative, Dawn is transformed from a brainless beauty queen to a woman intent on leaving the superficialities of her pageant past behind her. While other characters such as Jerry and Rita are fixated on this one event in her life, Dawn is rather embarrassed by it. Her participation in the beauty contest was not for vanity, but to help pay for her younger brother's college. "She," Zuckerman writes, "was always telling people her serious reasons for becoming Miss New Jersey and nobody even listened. They didn't want her to have serious reasons. All she could have for them was that face" (194). In fact, Dawn tries to suppress a story mentioning her as the 1949 Miss New Jersey and gives away her pageant clothes to charity. Her motivations to live on a farm are not to live in a mythic American pastoral, but to find meaningful and rewarding work, stemming from childhood memories, and to assert her new identity as something apart from Miss New Jersey. As an active woman who attempts to build her

own business, she strives to be more than the wife of Swede Levov and Merry's mother. Dawn takes the work seriously, studying cattle breeding, helping with the intense manual labor on the farm, and caring for the calves. Her facelift comes *after* Merry's bombing and *after* her mental breakdown, not so much because of simple vanity but in order to remake herself because of the trauma of losing her daughter. Her desire for a new house is perhaps not because the old one was not good enough as Jerry tells Zuckerman, but also because of the trauma Merry's crime inflicted. Finally, Dawn stands up to Lou Levov's Jewish inquisition, demanding that he see her as an individual. Lou obsessively interrogates Dawn about her family's degree of anti-Semitism, yet Zuckerman tells us that Lou likes to tell anti-Catholic jokes. A hypocrite and controlling, Lou tries to dictate how Dawn and Swede will raise their children, demanding concessions and, though they compromise, Lou tries to get Dawn to reject her own religion.

As for Merry, much of her characterization also depends on the source we choose to focus on. From Jerry's version and portions of Zuckerman's imagining, Merry appears to have been born the monstrous character. Her stutter and appearance seem to align her physical manifestations with the ugliness of her character. However, rather than a monster, Merry embodies the grotesque, a character whose outward appearance and mannerisms transgress cultural norms and evoke empathy—at least Swede's empathy if not the reader's. Zuckerman suggests that Dawn was too obsessed with the stuttering as Merry saw therapist after therapist, and the idea that Merry felt insecure because of her mother's beauty persists throughout the novel. But again, a nexus of complex forces seem to be at work here, influencing and shaping Merry's upbringing. According to Mark Shechner, the most damaging influence on Merry is not Swede or Dawn, but rather an

inherited and learned fanaticism passed on from Lou Levov, and also exemplified by Jerry's maniacal rages. Lou, Jerry, and Merry scream together. Her political views mirror Lou's, who yells at the television anytime Nixon appears. In an earlier scene, Merry seems to have learned this type of rage when she screams violently at Lyndon B. Johnson on the television screen. Merry, Shechner declares, is the return of the Jewish repressed (147). Return of the repressed or not, Merry's inexplicable act of terror comes from a variety of places: psychological, genetic, and the influence of her antiwar peers. Merry, like Swede, is caught up in the raging momentum of history.

Interpretations of the American pastoral have usually centered on the choice of the Levovs to live in Old Rimrock and live on the farm raising cattle—a literal pastoral, a physical place to escape into an ahistorical existence akin to the myth of the American frontier. Zuckerman writes that Swede wanted to be Johnny Appleseed happily spreading his seeds across the country. Swede's version of Johnny Appleseed is not religious: "Wasn't a Jew, wasn't an Irish Catholic, wasn't a Protestant Christian" (though, the real Johnny Appleseed preached the Gospel) (*American Pastoral* 316). Zuckerman posits the American pastoral more noetically—a state of mind or a way of thinking about the kind of imagined idyll that people think America should be. The American pastoral is not Old Rimrock but the myth itself. It's not just the WASP myth, but the myth the Newark Jewish community have themselves envisioned; it's the myth of every immigrant and ethnic group that constructs for themselves the mythic vision in which their otherness will fade into "the ordinary way, the natural way, the regular American-guy way" (89). Zuckerman finds the epitome of this American myth in his imagined recreation of the

Levov-Dwyer Thanksgiving, which he calls “the American pastoral par excellence” (402). During this “dereligionized” holiday, there is a

moratorium on the three-thousand-year-old nostalgia of the Jews, a moratorium on Christ and the cross, and the crucifixion for the Christians, when everyone in New Jersey and elsewhere can be more passive about their irrationalities than they are the rest of the year. A moratorium on all the grievances and resentments, and not only for the Dwyers and Levovs but for everyone in America who is suspicious of everyone else.” (402)

American identity, therefore, in Roth’s handling here is not the static perfection of either WASPness or the assimilated American Jew, but rather a dynamic, fluctuating, complex, tension-ridden identity that results from America’s multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious groups continuously and inevitably conflating with and ramming into each other. The American pastoral is America’s controlling myth, utopian, but within the American pastoral lies also “the indigenous American berserk,” the inexplicable—that which myth can neither control nor explain (*American Pastoral* 86).

I Married a Communist: Jewish and American Identity Reconciled?

In 1950, RKO pictures released a Cold War propaganda film titled *I Married a Communist*, produced and enthusiastically backed by Howard Hughes. The film, which was renamed *The Woman on Pier 13*, and its communist-paranoia-plot was downplayed in trailers after it initially failed to connect with audiences, was a direct product of the House Un-American Activities Committee’s machinations against communist infiltration of American culture, business, and media. Because of the power and influence of film, rooting out alleged communists in Hollywood became one the committee’s primary

focuses. Ironically, during World War II, at the secret behest of the US government, Hollywood had produced *pro*-Soviet films in order to consolidate public support for America's temporary allies in the fight against the Nazis. This allowed certain pro-Stalinist remnants in Hollywood after the war, and their presence helped fuel the 1950s' circus and self-aggrandizing that became known in some descriptions as the Hollywood witch hunt (Leab 59-66).⁶³ Among the aims of HUAC was to monitor and censor the entertainment industry for any aspect of anti-Americanism as regulated by Ayn Rand's report for the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, which prescribed vigilance against any film that might undermine the independent man, industrialists, and the free enterprise system. These ideals were described in the report as being "inseparable from Americanism 'by body and soul'" (Noakes 662). Additionally, not only were films not supposed to denigrate these "American" precepts, they were supposed to promote them as well. Spelled out before Congress, the parameters of American identity were being defined by an unelected coterie of right wing intellectuals and then enforced by an elected body that singled out communism as a legally intolerable ideology.

Although Roth's novel has little to do with the plot of the aforementioned film, the same title is used by actress Eve Frame, ex-wife of the novel's central character, radio star Ira Ringold (stage name Iron Rinn). An anti-communist rant that tells how she was duped and her daughter was a victim of Ira's attempts to indoctrinate her, the book was the brain-child of the politically ambitious couple, Bryden Grant and Katrina Van Tassel Grant, who bullied Frame into writing the book. Similar to Updike and Morrison, Roth demonstrates the irony of how the zealous attempt to define and codify American identity

⁶³ Allegorized famously in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Ira reads Miller's 1945 novel *Focus*.

actually makes us less American. Roth explores right-wing American extremism and Ira and Johnny O'Day's communism. As much as Nathan Zuckerman seems unattached to the events in the novel—he is chiefly a passive listener—Zuckerman concludes that American identity at its very heart is that of the independent, critical thinker, who constantly probes and questions with which ideologies he is faced. He sees this ideal in his father and the novel's main narrator Murray Ringold, Ira's older brother, whose independent teaching and ideas get him temporarily fired from teaching high school and factors into HUAC's investigation of him and his brother.

How much independent thought can America tolerate—the novel asks—before it begins to behave as a totalitarian state bent on crushing those who challenge hegemony? Not much, according to *I Married a Communist*. Aspects of *American Pastoral* are deemed as a conservative retrospective on the 1960s antiwar movement, and I have argued that it is conservative in the context of demythologizing aspects of sixties' counterculture and in its reverence for certain values of Lou's and Swede's generations. As a follow up, though, *I Married a Communist* wants to take a sledgehammer to the brand of conservatism that leads to nationalistic frenzy—or the American unthinking, as Murray Ringold puts it. Written forty years after the main events of the novel take place, *I Married a Communist* is not limited to the time period it portrays. America's intense nationalism survived HUAC, McCarthyism, the Vietnam War, and was revitalized with a vengeance during the Reagan years. Its nationalism, a type of American conservatism, absolves all sins committed by the nation's greatest sinners. One of the overarching similes of the novel is Murray's comparison of the elaborate funeral held for a canary in the Italian ward of Newark—its carnivalesque atmosphere, the spectacle of the absurd,

everyone but Ira and the canary's owner in on the joke—to Richard Nixon's funeral and its parade of right-wing players and his centrist apologists. The "masters of the most shameless ways of undoing an opponent," Murray declares, "those for whom moral concerns must always come last, uttering all the well-known, unreal, sham-ridden cant about everything but the dead man's real passions" (*I Married a Communist* 278).

Kissinger, Ford, Reagan, "Iran-Contra arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi seated next to Donald Nixon. The burglar G. Gordon Liddy there with his arrogant shaved head. The most disgraced of vice presidents, Spiro Agnew, there with his conscienceless Mob face" (279). Among them, within the fiction of the novel, are Ira's enemies Katrina Van Tassel and Bryden Grant. "In my ninety years," Murray concludes, "I've witnessed two sensationally hilarious funerals, Nathan. Present at the first as a thirteen-year-old, and the second I saw on TV just three years ago," the funeral for the canary and the one "when they buried Richard Milhous Nixon with a twenty-one-gun salute" (280). Both are spectacles to behold; Jimmy the canary's funeral is a grotesque funeral, a parody of the grand productions that the Italian community normally puts on for its religious holidays and saints' feasts. With Nixon's funeral, everyone, though, is oblivious to the irony. The canary's funeral is not Bakhtin's medieval carnival or spectacle, since it is not a ritual; the canary's owner, Russomanno, is actually sincere in his grief, and it lacks the subtle complexities of medieval carnival. So it is what Bakhtin referred to as the "negative" parody "of modern times" as Russomanno is laughed at rather than laughing with (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 11). The distinction is important because Murray wants Zuckerman to see the simile. Since Nixon's funeral in Murray's eyes is as ridiculous as the canary's, it too becomes a negative parody, in which, according to

Bakhtin, nothing is renewed or gained for its participants from the experience.

Additionally, the “modern” spectacle of Nixon’s funeral is more in line with Toni Morrison’s description of it. We should see the narrative of the spectacle underlying the funeral itself. “They aren’t mysterious events,” Murray muses, “They don’t require a genius to ferret out their meaning. . . . I only wish the Italians from the old First Ward could have been out there at Yorba Linda with Dr. Kissinger and Billy Graham. *They* would have known how to enjoy the spectacle” (280). Recall, then, that Morrison describes the spectacle as where the “official story is formed and is a superior mechanism for guaranteeing its longevity. Spectacle offers signs, symbols, and images that are more persuasive than print and which can smoothly parody thought” (Morrison, *Birth of a Nation ’hood*, xvii). The official story forming at Nixon’s funeral is that Nixon had a “towering intellect,” and Kissinger, quoting from *Hamlet*, decrees, “He was a man, take him for all and all, I shall not look upon his like again” (*I Married a Communist* 278). President Clinton praises Nixon for his “remarkable journey” and thanks him for his “wise counsel” (278). The signs and symbols are all present: the American flag wrapping Nixon’s coffin; the music: “Hail to the Chief,” “America,” “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”; and “the national narcotic, “The Star-Spangled Banner,” there to “make everybody momentarily forget everything” and “induce catalepsy in the multitude” (278). The parody of thought is present, as the elephant in Yorba Linda is Nixon’s abuses and crimes, and for Murray, not just during his presidency but dating back to his communist-witch-hunting days in the forties. Thought is parodied in the strained and disingenuous pondering and reframing of Nixon’s legacy. His nefariousness is not discussed, because it blights the uniting narrative of Nixon the great

American that is building at his funeral. The spectacle wipes away Nixon's transgressions, but not just Nixon's, America's as well. The people destroyed along the way, the laws broken, the Constitution ignored, the secret bombings, all hidden beneath the stars and stripes and drowned out by the choruses from the national songbook. The spectacle is the unthinking American's tonic. Murray, though, deconstructs the Nixon panegyric. Kissinger, Murray says,

has no idea of the equivocating context in which Hamlet speaks of the unequaled king. But then who, sitting there under the tremendous pressure of sustaining a straight face while watching the enactment of the Final Cover-up, is going to catch the court Jew in a cultural gaffe when he invokes an inappropriate masterpiece? (279)

The spectacle of Nixon's funeral is a continuation of the "first postwar flowering of the American unthinking"—McCarthyism—"that is now everywhere" (284). The McCarthy era, Murray explains, inaugurated "the postwar triumph of gossip as the unifying credo of the world's oldest democratic republic" (284). Murray observes that McCarthy really was interested not in rooting out communists, but performing before the public, the theatricality, or as I refer to it, as another spectacle that exhibits and galvanizes power and ideology. The accompanying persecution is an ugly part of American identity, the need for "moral disgrace as public entertainment" (Roth revisits this with a vengeance in *The Human Stain*) (284). But also, the moral disgrace is not just a form of political sadism—and it wasn't in 1692 either—but a way of inscribing the power of the state into the public consciousness via the spectacle, for McCarthy was not a lone wolf, but an avaricious bandwagoner who took his cue from HUAC and Nixon. If he

were a more tactful politician, McCarthy could have continued on for years, but he was stupid and reckless and was stopped only when he turned his sights on US Army personnel. HUAC, in contrast, lasted until the late sixties. McCarthy was HUAC's senatorial monster, and HUAC was the monster that gained strength from the concoction of two lethal products of the postwar period: hubris and fear.⁶⁴ The hubris of rising nationalism and military power and the fear of communism catalyzed the US government to delineate the limits of American identity. As Ira points out, HUAC considered communism more un-American than racism. Instead of hauling segregationists, suspected lynchers, and admitted white supremacists before its hearings, HUAC focused on communism, certainly for a number of reasons, but one of the chief reasons was the threat it posed to America's consumer-capitalist economy. As Morrison dramatized in her trilogy, the limits of American identity had already been prescribed along racial lines. But with the New Deal, Franklin Roosevelt enraged conservatives by implementing vast changes to the American economy. Regulatory and more pro-worker than ever before, Roosevelt heightened fears among conservatives, already on the alarm for anything that sniffed of communism. Additionally, by focusing on enemies from the outside or infiltration of enemies and philosophies from the inside, the country could unite around a common threat and mask its internal fractures. The postwar fervor was such that even liberals "rode the anti-Communist bandwagon," as the Truman administration pursued the agenda aggressively; Hubert Humphrey tried to make the Communist party illegal and spearheaded an effort to set up "detention centers" for "suspected subversives" (Zinn 422-23, 427). Murray explains that the framing of domestic unions and communists was that they were foreign: HUAC had "gone after the United Electric Workers," the

⁶⁴ HUAC, was, in fact, created in 1938, but became a standing committee in 1945.

complicit media calling “the picketers’ appearance ‘an invasion of forces hostile to the congressional inquiry.’ Not a legal demonstration as guaranteed by rights laid down in the Constitution but an *invasion*, like Hitler’s of Poland and Czechoslovakia” (*I Married a Communist* 6). Murray points out that a member of the committee, “without a trace of embarrassment at the un-Americanness lurking in his observation,” explicitly pointed out that many picketers spoke Spanish in order to highlight their otherness (6). Racial and ethnic issues become apparent because non-Anglo Americans had to display their “Americanness” more so than others since their differences more easily aroused suspicion. Murray, though, epitome of Jewish intellect and critical thinking, counters that the rabid “Americanness” runs counter to American principles—and law.

Nathan Zuckerman explains how the barrage of nationalism affected him as a boy. From Norman Corwin’s *On a Note of Triumph*, a tribute to American troops on V-E Day, Zuckerman becomes inspired by the theme of the common man unifying Americans under “the myth of a national character to be partaken by all.” He “was a Jewish child” but “didn’t care to partake of the Jewish character. I didn’t even know, clearly, what it was,” he tells us (38). “I wanted to partake of the national character” (38). “History . . .” he continues, and “America had been scaled down and personalized; for me that was the enchantment not only of Norman Corwin but of the times” (39).⁶⁵ The “high demotic poetry that was the liturgy of World War II” allowed you to “flood into America” and America to flood “into you” (39). Zuckerman’s comment that he wanted to partake of the national character rather than in his Jewishness identifies a distinction between the two—as if Jews made no contribution to the Americanness. The “clearly” interposed between

⁶⁵ Norman Corwin wrote and produced radio programs during the 1930s and 1940s. Most notable is his *On a Note of Triumph*, which celebrated America’s victory in World War II and has a profound impact on young Nathan Zuckerman.

the clauses suggests some regret about being unaware of the Jewish character.

Zuckerman's father and Murray both represent a significant Jewish contribution to American identity: the belief in an intellectual, dialectical, liberal democracy that contributed to American progressivism. Mr. Zuckerman attempts to engage his son by asking sensible questions about his support for Henry Wallace's 1948 candidacy in the presidential election. This passage comes when Nathan reminisces about Ira's influence on him as Nathan begins to turn toward extremism. Although Nathan has not adopted communism, his passion makes him susceptible. With Ira's influence, Zuckerman picks out the theme of the common man in Corwin's broadcast. "Corwin's 'little guy,'" Zuckerman exclaims, "was American for 'proletariat'" (38). Zuckerman's passion for the progressive cause leads him to shout at his father "Red-baiter!" after a disagreement over Wallace (33). Zuckerman's anger should remind us of Merry screaming about politics at the Swede in *American Pastoral*. Swede had attempted to get Merry to protest the Vietnam War by organizing locally and using democracy by encouraging her to accompany him on a trip to discuss it with their senator. Merry, though, refuses, spouting on about revolution, which eventually leads to her killing an innocent civilian. As a boy, Zuckerman grows more defiant against his father and ridicules his father's patient belief in the Democratic Party's uneven progressivism. Zuckerman refers to himself as Little Tom Paine, after the indefatigable Thomas Paine, who is a hero to Ira Ringold and with the help of Ira's influence to Zuckerman himself. Zuckerman reads Howard Fast's historical novel *Citizen Tom Paine* and is already mesmerized by Fast's common-man-hero picture of Paine when Ira intensifies the spell. "*He did it all alone,*" Zuckerman thinks, repeating a line from Fast's book as well Paine's declaration that he belonged to

no religion: “My own mind is my own church,” Zuckerman quotes (25). And he states that reading Paine angered and emboldened him. But the novel begins to demythologize Paine as his credo is more of a sign of a megalomaniac, an obstinate, uncompromising figure; brilliant, articulate, and effective for sure—Paine, as depicted in this mythical garb, is the man you want when you need to tear down, not to build; “My only friend is revolution” Paine famously declared.⁶⁶ For Zuckerman, Fast romanticizes Paine as a “folkloric belligerent . . . bearing a musket in the unruly streets” and that he died alone with his “defiant independence” (25). Zuckerman concludes, “There was nothing about Paine that could have been more appealing” (25). Ira’s death mirrors Paine’s, as Ira dies alone in rural New Jersey a broken man. Of course, in Fast’s account the “it” in “He did it all alone” means he stood up for the common man alone among his fellow revolutionaries, but the vagueness of the “it” hangs there as if Paine started the Revolution by himself. Either way, neither is true. Certainly, Paine’s rhetorical contributions were loudest and vital to the morale of the revolutionaries and winning over a reticent American public about the Revolution, but alone he was not—he was aided in the publication, printing, and editing of *Common Sense*, most notably by Benjamin Rush, and was helped by the network of revolutionaries who had laid the groundwork for American independence. And it is this myth of Paine alone that the novel wants to deconstruct, for it was not necessarily Paine’s political philosophies that earned him enemies, but his attack on organized religion that led to charges of atheism—this was the taboo that Paine breached (as well as a vicious letter he sent to the most popular man in America, President George Washington, over his administration and Paine’s French

⁶⁶ Of course, the real Paine actually does lay out plans to build a more equal and just nation; however, it is the more irascible traits in Fast’s image of Paine to which the young Zuckerman is attracted.

imprisonment). Until Paine's ostracizing, he actually used his connections well and in that sense he was able to maneuver politically and accomplish goals, something Ira and Johnny O'Day are unable to do. Because of this, Paine had power and influence which are lacking in Ira and O'Day except for O'Day's influence over Ira and Ira's influence over the boy Zuckerman. Though Ira's radio program is successful, it is so mainly because of his rhetorical skill and his dressing up as figures such as Abraham Lincoln—it is the performative aspects of the program and his appearances, the entertainment to which his audience is drawn. Mr. Zuckerman tries to get Nathan to understand what makes political processes effective rather than attempt to force change on demand. Nevertheless, Nathan chooses to believe in the most romantic aspects of Paine and Ira. Thus, Nathan looks upon Paine and Ira uncritically, as Ira looks upon Johnny O'Day.

O'Day, in fact, renames Ira "Iron Man Ira," and Ira starts going by the name of "Iron Rinn" when he lands his radio gig. O'Day takes charge of Ira's education, telling him what books to read, how to write, and he draws up a paper called "Some Concrete Suggestions for Ringold's Utilization" (37). Seeing Ira as a cog, O'Day offers didactic advice. Nathan begins to write radio plays for Ira's program, and Ira, "as though he and O'Day were together," would alter them to reflect the "workingman's argot" (37). Zuckerman reflects that just as he "was the perfect target for Ira's tutorials, the orphaned Ira was the perfect target for O'Day's" (43). As Ira begins to take Nathan under his wing, he gives Nathan a record of Soviet propaganda music to listen to, mainly military songs; Nathan interprets this as Ira's next move, to get him to turn toward communism. Roth, thus, makes no distinction between nationalist/capitalist propaganda and communist propaganda as both resort to jingoism, patriotism, and celebration of the military. Roth

illustrates the blind allegiance to communism by its followers by pointing to their accommodation and rationalizing of Stalin's brutal regime as Mr. Zuckerman interrogates Ira about the murder of Jan Masaryk at the hands of Soviet communists. Murray recalls that "Ira obeyed every one-hundred-eighty-degree shift of [Communist] policy. Ira swallowed the dialectical justification for Stalin's every villainy . . . another innocent guy co-opted into a system he didn't understand. . . . But my brother abased himself intellectually the same way they all did" (181).

Both Nathan and Ira break from the tradition of Jewish intellectualism because of their rash zealotry. As alluded to earlier, Nathan believes that there lies an essential American identity apart from his Jewishness. However, Nathan's assumption is an ignorant one since Jews have been a powerful force in shaping American identity, especially in the twentieth century. Since *Communist* focuses strongly on the critical and intellectual thinking of Murray and Mr. Zuckerman and their political views, the novel shows how vital Jewish skepticism is to American liberal democracy. Important here is the history of the Jewish Diaspora. Since Jews have had to live as minorities in other nations, culturally they have been skeptical of nationalist propaganda. Because nationalist propaganda in predominantly Christian nations where millions of Jews lived was often primarily anti-Semitic, Jews had good reason to be skeptical and even downright fearful. Of course, the most obvious and horrific example is Nazi Germany, nationalism run amok, but many Jews also distrusted American nationalism since it, too, was fueled by strains of anti-Semitism. Before World War II, many nationalistic American politicians, often representing the WASP elite, were isolationists and suspected Nazi sympathizers (Roth's novel *The Plot Against America* focuses on this very issue). Such is the suspicion

that Ira has for the WASPish Grants, whom, marking the beginning of his downfall, Ira accuses of having ties to Werhner von Braun, a scientist who engineered rockets for the Nazis. As Mr. Zuckerman tries to make clear to Nathan, his support for Truman in the 1948 election was meant to defeat the Republicans, regardless of Truman and the Democratic Party's flaws. Since Wallace stood little chance of winning, votes for him might ensure the Republican Thomas Dewey's victory (plus, Mr. Zuckerman was wary of Wallace's Communist Party ties). Mr. Zuckerman further explains to his son that Republican rule during the Great Depression almost led to his own joining of the Communist party. Mr. Zuckerman, though, saw Franklin Roosevelt as a pragmatic defender of working people against Republicans wanting to hand over the nation to the interests of big business: "A great man saved this country's capitalism from the capitalists and saved patriotic people like me from Communism" (103). Indeed, history shows that the Jewish vote shifted dramatically to the Democratic Party under Roosevelt, helping to usher in the electorate's reevaluation of progressive politics after twelve years of Republican administrations. Thus, politically, Jewish support for the New Deal was already helping to redefine American identity politically. Furthermore, as Andrew Heinze argues in *Jews and the American Soul*, the myth, which Nathan naively believes, that America's identity is absent of Jewishness discounts the important role Jewish ideas had in shaping American ideas about democracy and freedom. Specifically, Heinze focuses on the Jewish intellectual tradition that profoundly influenced American culture and politics during the early part of the twentieth century. Jewish skepticism and scholarship in America rose to prominence especially after World War I, mainly through, Heinze argues, Jewish leadership in psychology. By not acknowledging the Jewishness of

America, Nathan fails to see the value in his father's and Murray's pragmatic and reflective thinking since he wants to partake of what he sees as a separate "American" (non-Jewish) character. Here, as in *American Pastoral*, the problem is not so much the abandonment of Jewishness for Americanness, but rather failing to see the Jewishness within America. Nathan, instead, imagines an uninfluenced American identity, springing not from a century and a half of development, but rather from the radio episode of Norman Corwin and the victory in World War II. Nathan falsely believes that America and Jewishness have no history outside of his experience of it, and more importantly that they have no history together. Similar to Merry in *American Pastoral*, Nathan's naiveté is that America can simply be reimagined anew, and through the force of his own and Ira's will this new America can come into being. This new America in Nathan's mind is absent of Jewishness.

Nathan's attempt to erase his Jewishness, to deny Jewishness as part of American identity, is paralleled monstrously by Eve Frame, who tries to remake herself as "American" by covering up her Jewish past. Born Chava Fromkin, Eve changes her name and marries movie star Carlton Pennington to help her acting career. Eve is a social climber who is willing to cut herself off from her Jewish roots in order to be successful and accepted among society's elite. Eve, Murray explains, tries to "launch [her]self undisturbed by the past into America" (158). She claims that she is the descendant of sea captains of a Yankee Clipper from New Bedford, Massachusetts, her father a patent lawyer, her mother running a tearoom, linking herself to the industrial, entrepreneurial class and capitalistic adventurousness of early America. Under pressure from the Grants, Eve further attempts to assert her American identity by claiming in her "memoir" it is her

duty as an “American actress to fight the Communist infiltration” which is attempting to “tear down the American way of life” (244). Murray senses the anti-Semitism since the memoir was mainly orchestrated by the WASPish Grants, as he suspects the memoir intimates that communism and anti-Americanness are perpetrated secretly by Jews. The title of the memoir *I Married a Communist* and the theme, thus, suggest that Jews cannot be trusted and their deceit is so subtle that all Americans are susceptible—it has all the subconscious camp of the B-movie of the same name. Eve’s need to hide her Jewishness, though, beckons her repressed anxiety. After Pennington, she marries two Jewish men successively and takes out her guilt on Ira. More importantly, Eve’s masking of her Jewishness leaves her susceptible to the machinations of the Grants. Just as Roth elaborates more intensely in *The Human Stain*, the belief that one can totally extricate herself from her cultural identity and create her own identity is self-deceiving. In denying her Jewishness, Eve loses her critical awareness since she herself becomes anti-Semitic. Murray observes that her willingness to play a role led to “unthinking. . . . The thing that’s happening to her is unobserved by her” (157). One does not have to be Jewish to be a critical thinker or intellectual for sure, nor is Roth laying out an “essence” of Jewishness but a tradition, the result of cultural survival, in which Jews have emphasized the intellect. As Heinze observes, the Jewish scholar plays an important part in the Jewish community not just as keeper of a sacred history but as an exemplar on how to live and conduct one’s life. Without Jewishness, a self-denying Jew becomes susceptible to others’ manipulation of her identity just as the Grants manipulate Eve.

As Murray relates Ira and Eve’s story, Zuckerman increasingly reflects on his own past. Zuckerman’s break with Ira comes when he goes to college and begins to study

under Leo Glucksman, a Ph.D. candidate in literature at the University of Chicago. Trying to impress Glucksman, Nathan hands in a copy of his radio play *The Stooge of Torquemada*, an example of his propagandist literature. Glucksman, though, rebukes him, beginning another phase of Nathan's tutelage: "It began to seem that just about everybody gave me a shot," he recalls (222). "Educate Nathan. The credo of everybody I dared say hello to" (222). Glucksman espouses apolitical or a disinterested aesthetic theory and sees the working class contemptuously. But he is just as didactic, and Zuckerman observes that his life has been "one long speech that I've been listening to . . . how to think, how not to think; how to behave, how not to behave" (222). Although Glucksman rejects Nathan after Nathan does not return his sexual advances, Zuckerman does not necessarily disavow Glucksman's theories about art. Instead, Zuckerman reflects that the "one long speech" is "sometimes original, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes crap (the speech of the incognito), sometimes maniacal, sometimes matter-of-fact, and sometimes like the sharp prick of a needle" (222). He concludes his Hamlet-esque soliloquy by asking "was I from the beginning, by inclination as by choice, merely an ear in search of a word?" (222). Zuckerman's self-reflection demonstrates the need of the artist to self-analyze, to question him or herself. Zuckerman instead exemplifies the constantly self-reflective, self-doubting artist who tries to make sense of the sound and fury of the "book of voices" and "arias" around him (222). Both Ira and Eve as actors are themselves artists, but neither possesses the necessary introspection to strive for authenticity. Instead of using art to locate their authentic selves they use it to mask them. Ira plays the roles of certain American figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Nathan Hale, Orville Wright, Wild Bill Hickock, and Jack London on a show called *The Free and the*

Brave, which, ironically, functions as the type of nationalist propaganda broadcasts of the 1940s. Ira hides his politics behind the masks of those he impersonates. Iron Rinn, Murray concludes, “never discovered his life” (319). Interestingly, Roth points to the notion that the artist constructs his identity from the cacophony of propaganda. Zuckerman recalls the line from Murray’s reading of *Macbeth* that “would assert itself . . . the remainder of my life: But I must also feel it as a man.” Zuckerman remarks that the line is his “first encounter with a spiritual state that is aesthetic and overrides everything else” (314). The line comes from Macduff who upon learning of his family’s murder at the hands of Macbeth replies, “He has no children” (314). Murray asserts that Macduff is referring to himself, contrary to “the standard interpretation” (315). But Murray implies that Macduff, in this moment of grief, is able to step outside of himself and question himself because “They were all struck for thee! Naught that I am,/Not for their own demerits but for mine” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.3.224-225). Malcolm has told Macduff to “Dispute it like a man” (meaning revenge); Macduff declares that he will, but not before he must “feel it as a man” by internalizing it and recognizing the possibility of his own faults. It is a moment of Shakespearean complexity because a man must on one hand be sure of himself to take revenge and seek justice, but also to be as unsure of himself in the role of the injustice: a man thinks about who he is. And it is through his talks with Murray that Zuckerman thinks about himself and his life. To do so, Zuckerman retreats from the world, living in the physical space of the American pastoral, overlooking a pond and mountain range “apart from people” (*I Married a Communist* 71). Zuckerman observes that his retreat in itself is unoriginal: “it’s the earliest images—of independence and freedom, particularly—that do live obstinately on, despite the blessing and

bludgeoning of life's fullness. . . . It has a history. It was Rousseau's. It was Thoreau's. The palliative primitive hut" (72). To the end, though, Murray asks Zuckerman to even reexamine his choice to live in isolation: "Beware the utopia of isolation" (315).

The novel ends with Zuckerman remaining in his isolation and pondering the cosmic meaninglessness of the entire episode of Ira Ringold—it has been all just sound and fury—another allusion to Macbeth. But what is also implied through the entire novel is the respect for the patient, thoughtful lives and words of Zuckerman's father and Murray Ringold. Zuckerman may have made his choice to leave most of his Jewishness behind in attempt to become his own person in the wilds of America, but the meaning of Murray's last words to him resonate—never stop thinking about the consequences of his choices. It is this introspection that is vital to Zuckerman's Jewish and American identity.

The Human Stain: Arcadia Asunder

Two aspects of American identity bracket *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth's concluding novel to his trilogy. The first, forming the novel's opening salvo, is America's obsessive, Puritanical heritage driven by the "ecstasy of sanctimony" (*The Human Stain* 2). The second, the one that ends the novel and, thus, the trilogy, is an image carried over from *I Married a Communist*: the ascetic man, living "atop an arcadian mountain in America" (361). In *The Human Stain*, the targets of America's Puritanical wrath are both President Bill Clinton and Coleman Silk. Their ordeals become a narrative spectacle of American identity played out—one on the scaffold of American television, the other in the American microcosm of rural New England—symbol of the American pastoral. The latter is a place where a black man passing as a Jewish one believes he can cut himself off from his cultural and racial heritage and avoid the pervasive cloud of blame, self-

righteous morality, and punishment that simultaneously enwraps the President of the United States. The environs of Athena College, Coleman's former employer, are tucked away in the pastoral setting, seemingly beyond the reaches of a society caught up in a frenzy of persecution. But that solitary man atop the Arcadian mountain in the American pastoral is Lester Farley, a broken, murderous veteran traumatized by his tour in the Vietnam War. Caught between Coleman and Lester is Faunia Farley, Lester's much abused ex-wife and now Coleman's lover, who, like Coleman, attempts to reconstruct her identity apart from her past when she was a victim of unspeakable domestic horrors. Nowhere is safe in Roth's America: society is filled with twentieth-century Roger Chillingworths, both male and female, in the personas of Kenneth Starr and Delphine Roux—and the throngs of morally indignant voyeurs; shattered, angry, and armed men roam the American interior; the domestic space is a sanctuary of freedom for depraved patricians preying on women and children. Not even the castle walls of Athena College, shrine of enlightenment, can keep out America's dark-aged desire to purify itself through the spectacle.

Mark Shechner posits Coleman as the “modern Dimmesdale” and his scarlet letter is “‘R’ for racist,” but abruptly leaving the *The Scarlet Letter* analogy behind, Shechner reframes *The Human Stain* as Greek tragedy (152). But *The Scarlet Letter* reference is worth revisiting because just as Hawthorne wanted to explore the darkest roots of American identity, Roth, as he does in *I Married a Communist* through HUAC and McCarthyism, continues to allude to the Puritanical witch hunts of the seventeenth century. At the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne presents some of the defining images of the Puritan Utopia—the prison, the scaffold, and the gallows—the signs and

mechanisms of ultimate state power over the body. Since these mechanisms were often used to punish the morally corrupted body, they served to purify the offending individual of his or her sin as well as ritualize through the spectacle the purgation of sinful influences. Though the scaffold and gallows have been discarded as punishments for moral transgressions, the desire to enact the ritual of corporeal purgation remains deeply entrenched in twentieth century America. The HUAC and McCarthy hearings from *I Married a Communist*, though, differ in certain significant respects from *The Human Stain*'s Clinton-Lewinsky spectacle and Coleman Silk's ordeal. In the 1950s the communist witch hunt was exacerbated by real fears of communist infiltration and eventual revolution. The external threat was also felt to be real as communism spread throughout Eastern Europe, across Asia, and into the Western Hemisphere. But the Clinton-Lewinsky spectacle and Coleman's ordeal center solely on the tangential connection to the Puritan past: the performance of the profane that enables the reinscription of state, or in Coleman's case, administrative power. With the end of the Cold War, America's new enemy, terrorism, had not yet reached the level of public concern it would just a few years after 1998. With no apparent visceral threat, America turned its attention to, as Zuckerman bluntly puts it, "cocksucking," or the obsession with the nation's alleged moral degradation as supposedly embodied by President Clinton (*Stain* 2). The fixation on the profane spectacle of Clinton-Lewinsky offers the opportunity for "a piety binge" where the moral outrage can be transformed into state power for the persecutors (2). A similar spectacle occurs at Athena College when Coleman's colleagues use his ordeal to seize power. What is being reinscribed is a moral and political authority that the persecutors seize from Clinton and Coleman. So, while no

scaffold, pillory, or gallows are present to punish the body of Clinton, the explicit references to body parts and details of sexual acts incessantly regurgitated throughout the media serve as the figurative flagellation of Clinton's sinful corpus. As Zuckerman points out, there is a desire to punish Clinton's body: "The syndicated conservative newspaper columnist William F. Buckley wrote, 'When Abelard did it, it was possible to prevent its happening again,' insinuating—what Buckley elsewhere called Clinton's 'incontinent carnality'—might best be remedied [by] . . . castration" (3). Coleman's alleged transgression is also a moral one: a moral instituted through political correctness in which the profane is an utterance that supposedly unveils a taboo flaw present in the offender's character. In this case, it is both racism and sexism, loosely defined or defined not at all, or if defined, defined retroactively and strategically by an institutional, pious elite.

What should not be overlooked is that although Coleman's utterance of "spook" provides the opening for his colleagues to attack, the primary accuser is more motivated by Coleman's perceived sexism than racism. The sanctimony turns more vicious and corporeal when Delphine Roux sends Coleman an anonymous letter about his affair with Faunia Farley, accusing him of exploiting her sexually. But Roux uses the sexual angle to exploit the situation in order to humiliate and exact further vengeance upon Coleman. In his reconstruction of the incident, Zuckerman attempts to find a motive for such villainy. Delphine believes that her academic theories and training allow her to "read" the situation in the same way she might read a text, but in doing so she objectifies both of them, especially Faunia, denying her agency in her own decisions while at the same time sneering at her lower class status. In her feminist self-righteousness, Delphine, after reading about Faunia, decides that Coleman's affair with Faunia is nothing more than a

way to “psychologically” terrorize women, thinking “that it’s me, in effigy, you [Coleman] are out to get” (195). To Roux in her ivory tower, Faunia “intellectually does not even exist” and is “the weakest woman on this earth” in contrast to Roux’s success, attractiveness, and her “first-rate education” (198). Delphine, according to Zuckerman, is sexually repressed: all book and no life, she knows nothing of real experience outside of the classroom, Coleman tells her. The female Chillingworth, also a too-bookish European transplant, she secretly desires none other than Dean Silk, the bane of her existence. Her motivations are political and private, but never are they benign, for the spectacle is never altruistic, but meant to reinscribe and/or reconstitute the power dynamic. Delphine’s maniacal fixation on tearing down Coleman stems from her own desire to fit into America, in Zuckerman’s reimagining, as her anxieties over her Frenchness persist. In fact, to some degree she embodies a particular type of immigrant American who fled Europe to escape provincial aristocracy. Delphine wants to leave her mother and her Walincourt family and their traditions. Delphine is in “revolt against her Frenchness,” and like Coleman she seeks to forge her own identity—she comes to America in the “admirable effort to *make* herself” (272). Delphine detests her mother’s family’s respect for traditions rather than “the individual (*down* with the individual!)” (275). However, Delphine becomes frustrated because she understands only “academic American,” and “the cabal” of American feminists at Athena wield so much power over her (276, 271). Instead of making herself, she fears that she might become like them, judging every woman on her perceived commitment to feminism. As part of her assimilation, though, she partakes in the petty politics of the American academy. As dean, Coleman had reconfigured the department, getting rid of academic deadwood by purging the old-

fashioned WASPish professors from the school (for he was, as much as anyone knew, the only Jew)—in large part to reinvigorate Athena’s academics. Silk’s power play also has other motivations, but Delphine’s are fueled by a moralistic crusade. While not religious in nature, her motivations are a new form of piety for political correctness and identity politics that seek to purge this old-curmudgeon-chauvinist-dictatorial male in favor of her progressive-dictatorial high-mindedness. For example, upon becoming chair of the department, she calls Coleman into her office to interrogate him about his teaching because a female student claims that the plays he teaches are sexist. Delphine, now in a position of power, tries to dictate how he should teach courses and handle students. She succeeds in displacing him only when he utters the gaffe, but even then it’s not enough. By attempting to humiliate Coleman sexually by writing a letter excoriating him for his relationship with Faunia, she tries a figurative castration since her goal is to shame him into celibacy and, thus, powerlessness. For Coleman, his and Clinton’s biggest sin was not acting “[a]ppropriately. Appropriate. The current code word for reining in most any deviation from the wholesome guidelines and thereby making everybody ‘comfortable’” (152). He calls it the tyranny “of propriety” and sarcastically thinks that the crime is that the “luxury of these lives [was] disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk,” the hallmark of “American puritanism” (153-154).

As Coleman ponders his predicament, he reflects on the pervasiveness of the American puritanical spirit as a salve in which all aspects of American culture are steeped. As “a dominatrix in a thousand disguises” it infiltrates

civic responsibility, WASP dignity, women’s rights, black pride, ethnic allegiance, or emotion-laden Jewish ethical sensitivity. It’s not as though

Marx or Freud or Darwin or Stalin or Hitler or Mao had never happened—it's as though Sinclair Lewis had not happened. It's, he thought, as though *Babbitt* had never been written. It's as though not even that most basic level of imaginative thought had been admitted into consciousness to cause the slightest disturbance. A century of destruction unlike any other. . . . (153)

Coleman thinks of Sinclair Lewis,⁶⁷ champion of individual thought against groupthink and conformity, especially the kind that has now pervaded the American academy. Marx and Freud may have been original thinkers, but adherence to Marxism and Freudian exegesis are unquestionably en vogue, especially among the theories of someone like Delphine Roux. Coleman rages against this atmosphere of cultural sadism with the tenacity of his boxing days when he enjoyed pummeling his opponents. His plan to fight back is with his memoir, *Spooks*, that he now finds himself unable to write, and for which he decides to bring in Nathan Zuckerman. Coleman's inability to write his own story may come as a surprise since he has spent his entire life fiercely dedicated to his own self-fashioning. Indeed, in the atmosphere of postwar America, the virulent racism threatens to undo his ambitions and contributes to his decision to live as a white Jew. For Coleman hopes to explain to Steena, the first white woman he falls in love with, that the bigotry in America made his decision to pass "the most natural thing for someone with his outlook and temperament and skin color to have done" (120). Why "leave it to an unenlightened society to determine his fate" (120)? Like Lewis's George Babbitt, Coleman longs for something more than "the tyranny of the we that is dying to suck you in" (120). But Coleman's suffering is different from Babbitt's since Coleman is experiencing America

⁶⁷ Like Updike, Roth draws from Lewis's *Babbitt*.

as a black man, “a *Negro* and nothing else”—this is how America sees him, which Steena cannot reckon with (120). Although Coleman’s decision to pass as white seems to come suddenly, in reality the culmination of events works him over. First, he sees as a teenager that he can pass as white while boxing for the Knights of Pythias. Second, while in Washington, D.C. he is called a nigger after being refused a hot dog at Woolworth’s. Third, he feels degraded by the black elite while at Howard; he begins to understand “nigger” as having an economic tinge to its racism—he would even be “a nigger” among people of his own color because he lacked the pedigree. While in the Navy, he is beaten up for being black, and then the final rejection by Steena seals his decision. Coleman’s sister, in trying to explain Coleman’s rejection of their family, tells her brother Walt to “[s]ee him [Coleman] historically” and that “Coleman couldn’t wait to go through civil rights to get to his human rights, and so he skipped a step” (327). The postwar American Dream, Coleman realizes, will elude him as long as he remains black.

Convinced of his own innocence, Coleman sets out to separate from history. While not heading out west, Coleman instead, as Zuckerman puts it, becomes “the greatest of the great *pioneers* of the I” (108). Coleman is the latest incarnation of the American new man, Jay Gatsby reemerged from his humble beginnings. Although like Gatsby he cannot get his Daisy in the Anglo-American Steena, he gets her Jewish version in Iris Gittelman, because just as Daisy would have helped Gatsby complete his American Dream, Iris helps Coleman complete his modified version of it. Just as the section is called “Slipping the Punch,” Coleman slips the punch that Steena’s rejection would have been and adapts. As a pioneer of his new American self, Coleman tries to disconnect himself from his history: “Free to enact the boundless, self-defining drama of

the pronouns we, they, and I” (109). Coleman heads into the American pastoral of rural New England to live anew, where he believes the meanings of race will melt away, but they come back only to haunt him in the momentary return of the repressed through a mechanism Coleman believed he had ultimate control over: language. Shechner argues that “spook” is Coleman’s Freudian slip, Coleman “dying to be found out” (154). Thus, Coleman might, in fact, be referring to himself; in a double entendre, he refers disparagingly not only to his blackness, but to the ghost of his former self. His brother, Walt, had ordered Coleman not to show his lily-white face around the family again; sure enough, Coleman repeats the very phrase forty years later to his lawyer, Nelson Primus, after Primus tells him to stop seeing Faunia. “First ‘spooks,’ now ‘lily-white’—who knows what repellent deficiency will be revealed with the next faintly antiquated locution, the next idiom almost charmingly out of time that comes flying from his mouth?” Coleman asks himself (*Stain* 84). Indeed, it is “out of time” in the sense that these comments are out of his past—certainly, the first was not directed at the black students he had never seen before, but his careless language suggests that Coleman wants to reveal his secret. In the previous novels, we have seen Roth make use of the return of the repressed, and so it reappears in *The Human Stain* as well. Perhaps on some psychological level Coleman does desire to be found out, but we might also consider that the return of the repressed comes across in Roth as inevitable, and in this case it undermines Coleman’s belief that he can, in fact, create himself totally new, cut off from his past, and that he cannot control his own identity.

Although the novel shows Coleman brazenly asserting and sure of himself, beneath the surface Coleman actually loses control of his own narrative. And, in fact, the

very delusion that he could create himself from nothing seems to be the main reason that he cannot finish *Spooks* and needs Zuckerman to write it. He never was the author of himself in the way that he had imagined. “Was he merely being another American and, in the great frontier tradition, accepting the democratic invitation to throw your origins overboard if to do so contributes to the pursuit of happiness?” Zuckerman asks (334). But rather than overthrow his origins Coleman has not thrown everything overboard; his decision to pass is greatly influenced by the teachings of his father. Indeed, the education of the Silk household is steeped in the Western canon and tradition. Mr. Silk, we learn, had a “way of beating you down. With words. With speech. With what he called the language of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Dickens” (92). The children’s middle names are in honor of “Mr. Silk’s best-memorized play, in his view English literature’s high point,” Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (92). The children become like the characters they are named for: Walt is Walter Antony, and, in fact, does become the family’s more politically-inclined son and he is fiercely loyal to his father, the Caesar of the Silks, while Coleman is Coleman Brutus, who does become, at least in his mother’s view, the traitor. But Coleman, like Brutus, is also the most complex, and he figuratively kills his father by denying him as such: “No!” Coleman exclaims, “No you’re not!” as in Mr. Silk is no longer his father (92). The Silks “read all the old classics,” and the children were taken to Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York “to see the armor” (94). Mr. Silk also took his children to see George Cohan, writer of patriotic American music. Later, Ernestine complains to Zuckerman how students today are not familiar with *Moby-Dick*. Although Mr. Silk abhors racism and he himself is a victim, he raises his children to be fluent in European and white American texts and art. From what we know, Mr. Silk does not

introduce his children to black cultural achievement. True, Ernestine explains to Zuckerman that there should be more knowledge of black contributions (she chastises Zuckerman for not recognizing black historical figures), but as a teacher herself, she must have learned this independently since there is no indication Mr. Silk saw black history as a priority. Although Mr. Silk does want Coleman to attend Howard University, it is because he wants Coleman to gain access to the bourgeois black intellectual elite. Therefore, Mr. Silk's plan for his children's social mobility appears informed more by Booker T. Washington than W.E.B. Dubois. Mr. Silk's faith that steady mobility through hard work will eventually earn his family access to American success never seems to waiver. There is a hint that Mr. Silk has disdain for poor blacks, as he believes that the Newark Boys Club is "for slum kids, for illiterates and hoodlums bound for either the gutter or jail" (97). Although he despises Dr. Fensterman, a Jewish doctor, Mr. Silk hopes that Fensterman might show "an intelligent colored family" a "way in" to middle-class acceptance (97). Jews are the model for assimilation success in Mr. Silk's view, not blackness. Walt and Ernestine adopt social and cultural responsibility either in spite of Mr. Silk or they build from Mr. Silk's emphasis on education to develop their own independent thinking. Coleman, though, takes this immersion into Western culture as the impetus for his zealous individualism. In fact, Coleman's inspiration comes from his father's favorite play, *Julius Caesar*: "'What can be avoided / Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?'" Lines also from *Julius Caesar* quoted to him by his father and yet only with his father in the grave did Coleman at last bother to hear them—and when he did, instantaneously to aggrandize them. *This* had been purposed by the mighty gods! Silky's freedom" (108). Not surprisingly, Coleman becomes the professor of the cradle of

Western thought, Greek literature, which his brother Walt refers to as the whitest of subjects to teach. Although Coleman declares that he is free of his father, he is actually the one most influenced by him. Furthermore, Coleman's apparent pedantry also resembles his father's dictatorial style. Just as his father demanded exactness in using language, Coleman also demands this of his students, and in defending himself against the racism charges he goes precisely through not only the definitions of the term *spook* but the context in which he said it: "My father," he explains, "insisted on precision in my language, and I have kept faith with him" (84). True, Coleman refers to an invented version of his father—the Jewish saloon keeper—but only in terms of his occupation and ethnicity since the anecdote is consistent with Mr. Silk's depiction. Plus, just as Mr. Silk sees Jewishness as a model of assimilation, so does Coleman, as he chooses to pass as a Jew for social mobility. Additionally, Coleman, in his dictatorial tenure as Dean, either in the return of the repressed or from a guilty conscious, breaks up the "WASP establishment" of Athena and hires Herb Keble, "the first black in anything other than a custodial position" (19, 16). Coleman's attempt to diversify the faculty in the face of anti-Semitism present in the old guard might be an example of, as Ernestine says, doing the battle his way (327). Thus, instead of escaping his past, Coleman is influenced, driven, and haunted by it, in much the same way that Americans, rather than escaping from history, were shaped more by their attempt to escape it.

Escaping history is exactly what both Faunia and Lester Farley attempt to do. Each of the main characters attempts to recreate their identities irrespective of the past: Coleman, Delphine, and even Zuckerman himself, who admires Coleman, for Coleman, from Zuckerman's point of view, "had the system beat;" although, Zuckerman reflects

that history eventually did catch up to him (335). In Faunia, the novel presents the reader with a John Fowles-esque moment. For most of the novel, the reader has been led to believe that Faunia is an illiterate woman, only to learn toward the end that she had been faking illiteracy all along. After hearing of her diary, Zuckerman realizes Faunia's act was a declaration of independence from the world. Faunia finds power by rejecting literacy, and in ways she is much more powerful than Delphine, whose identity is greatly controlled by the pettiness of the academy. She has outsmarted both Coleman and Delphine's attempts to "read" her simply by lying about her illiteracy. All interpretations of her stemming from that premise prove to be false: "Everyone knows," Zuckerman observes, "is the invocation of the cliché . . . You *can't* know anything. The things you *know* you don't know. Intention? Motive? Consequence? Meaning? All that we don't know is astonishing. Even more astonishing is what passes for knowing" (209). We do get to know Coleman more than Faunia, but she remains elusive to the reader and to Zuckerman. Coleman attempts to characterize her, and even names her "Voluptas," after a Roman love goddess. Indeed, she is the sexual elixir that reinvigorates Coleman after the loss of his wife, job, and reputation. Coleman, essentially a dead man, arises from the cold New England grave with Faunia and a bottle of Viagra, the latter of which he said should be renamed Zeus. With the full amorous awakening of the rapacious king of gods, Coleman finds the natural nymph who had eluded him his whole life. She is not part of a game or scheme he tries to play, like Steena or Iris. As heavy-handedly as Roth attempts to shove Faunia toward us as the stereotypical sexpot sent to save the senior citizen septuagenarian, he at least attempts to thwart such a reading. Certainly, by making the reader think she is illiterate, Roth anticipates the reading of Faunia as woman *au*

naturale. But, perhaps unsuccessfully, Roth tries to add dimension to Faunia by allowing Nathan Zuckerman to attempt to wrest Faunia from Coleman's mythological objectification of her. In Zuckerman's *The Human Stain*, he knows Faunia's secret from the outset and some about her hellish life with the crazed and abusive Lester Farley. Fascinating to Zuckerman is how Faunia rewrote her identity while pretending to be illiterate, which is why he craves to read her diary that her stepmother withholds from him. Unable to access it, Zuckerman believes this is where he comes in: "I can only do what everyone does who thinks they know. I imagine. I am forced to imagine. It happens to be what I do for a living. It is my job. It's now all I do" (213). Piecing together information from Faunia's life, Zuckerman delves deep into the heart of the nightmare of American domesticity. Having been abused by her stepfather in her upper class upbringing, she tries to escape into what she imagined was the American pastoral. From Coleman's retelling, we gather that Faunia "married this farmer, older than herself, a dairy farmer, a Vietnam vet, thinking that if they worked hard and raised kids and made the farm work she could have a stable, ordinary life" (29). In Roth's handling though, the Vietnam vet is different from the World War II vet (Roth's World War II vets never suffer from PTSD in the trilogy). Perhaps delving too much into the stereotype of the shattered Vietnam vet,⁶⁸ Roth nevertheless attempts to show the damaging effects of that war on the men who fought in it and the social destruction its aftermath wreaked, particularly on the American family. In Lester's visit to the portable Vietnam memorial, Americans all around search for their lost loved ones: dead uncles, cousins, sons. As in *American Pastoral*, Vietnam is the bomb that shatters the American dream, especially for Lester and Faunia, since Lester's abuse of her, in Zuckerman's reimagining, results from

⁶⁸ Mark Shechner refers to Lester Farley as "Brand-X Vietnam Vet" (Shechner 156).

the violence he brings home from the war. Faunia, though, is the woman caught up in Lester's nightmare and her stepfather's depravity. Her real father's indifference and her mother's greed lead to the childhood abuse, American WASPness gone berserk. Through their relationship, both Faunia and Coleman try to escape out of time, unleash themselves from history, to create their own pastoral. Coleman comes to understand this phenomenon through his esotericism, which is why he prefers to think of her through the lens of Greek mythology; she plays nymph to him, the god. By feigning her illiteracy, Faunia, too, wants to withdraw from history as a way of coping with the trauma her experience in American domesticity has wrought. She, thus, attempts to remove herself from the American text, to live naturally with no real ties to society other than her need to make a living. Her sexuality is, like Hester Prynne's, her scarlet letter because other characters persecute her for it. Because of this persecution, her sexuality liberates her since from others' points of view she is invisible because of it. Her and Coleman's relationship is out of step with time as their age differences indicate. Coleman's children, supposedly enlightened and educated (two of them college professors as well), see her as a disgrace and "not the ideal woman to have linked with our father's legacy" (308). They assert that Faunia is a "cheap little cunt" (308). Lester obsesses over his ex-wife's love affairs particularly with "the Jew professor," but to him she is just a "bitch" (70). To Coleman, though, Faunia is "morally speaking, the *least* repellant person he knows," as the pair want their relationship to exist in an ahistorical suspension (164). While dancing with Coleman, she tells him to "imagine sustaining this"—the dance, being alone together all the time: "We've got all we need," she declares (231). Coleman attempts to read the newspaper story about Bill Clinton, but Faunia sees no connection between

“these escapades in Washington” and her life (235). To Faunia and Coleman, age, race, and ethnicity mean nothing. Zuckerman imagines that she knew Coleman’s secret but did not care just as Coleman does not care about her sexual past, her economic class, or her social status. However, she takes Coleman’s reading to her as some attempt to re-historicize her, to introduce her back into the America she despises and from which she flees.

But both Faunia’s and Coleman’s identities cannot be recreated out of a vacuum. Lester is the force of history that returns to destroy them. Faunia’s past literally comes back to kill her, and Coleman’s choice of passing as a Jewish man does as well. Part of Lester’s hatred for Coleman is his very Jewishness, since Lester believes that “fancy pants professors” protested the Vietnam War and that there “weren’t too many kikes in Vietnam, not that he can remember. They were too busy to getting their degrees. Jew bastard. There’s something wrong with those Jew bastards” he thinks (70). Additionally, Lester blames the “Jew girl” for distracting Clinton while “the budget goes down the drain” (247). Lester’s anti-Semitism fuels his hatred for Coleman and leads to their first violent encounter when he trespasses onto Coleman’s property. As a veteran, Lester sees himself as a loyal American who is being cuckolded by the Jewish other—the “enemy” (66). True, Zuckerman only suspects that Lester ran Coleman and Faunia off the road, but his eerie encounter with Farley seems to confirm such suspicions. Farley, who may have heard that Zuckerman was asking questions about the accident, ominously tells Nathan that “[t]he only time a secret gets out, Mr. Zuckerman, is when you tell a secret” (360). Zuckerman realizes his five year foray into the American pastoral has ended because he fears Farley will harass or kill him as long as he lives in the area. The final word of the

trilogy is “America,” but it is an America where a damaged war veteran has marked the pristine American frontier off for himself—he warns Zuckerman not to tell anyone about it. For Farley, the only pure America that exists is one unspoiled by others: “That’s why it’s clean and that’s why I come here,” he tells Zuckerman, “If man has to do with it, stay away from it” (360). Beware the utopia of isolation.

CHAPTER V

CODA

In striking contrast to the outward theme of Henry Luce's "The American Century," the series of novels that I have examined in this dissertation explicitly look inward at the American nation. At the forefront of these novels is the incongruence between America's material and ideal identities. Significantly, two wars primarily hover around the edges of these works: World War II and the Vietnam War. The United States' victory in World War II and the subsequent Cold War provided the political capital for both the country's foreign and domestic policies, both of which were designed to decide the US's permanent role in the world. Consequently, many in the government and much of the media were attempting to craft the role, the identity, of its citizens to help the United States carry out what Luce and others believed to be America's rightful destiny. In *American Pastoral*, Zuckerman refers to the end of the Second World War as "the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history," a moment when "the clock of history reset and a whole people's aims [were] no longer limited by the past" (40-41). Zuckerman's retrospective examination of Swede Levov's life forces him to reconsider one of the legacies of World War II. While the end of the war inspired many Jews to assimilate and to adopt the patriotism of mainstream American society, it also emboldened the government to enact the plan of global domination. In *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit Angstrom believes that the war was fought so he could live in an American paradise of perpetual happiness. The Morgans of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* are more skeptical about the postwar promise than the young Zuckerman and Rabbit, and their reaction to America's continuing racism sparks their decision to forge their version of a

black utopia. Nevertheless, they mimic WASP America, reject the Civil Rights Movement, and pay little attention to the Vietnam War, even when it wreaks havoc on their community. Thus, collectively these novels show that the postwar period was indeed a defining moment for the rest of the twentieth century in terms of the identity of the United States. The novels illustrate and investigate how the legacies of World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam, and the Reagan Era shape conceptions of American identity even today. The postwar era was not a time of consensus as advertised by the government and the media of the era or in nostalgic representations of it but an anxious time when Americans grappled with their own identities and their nation's.

Each series of novels explicates the divergence from America's founding ideal identity. John Updike's *Rabbit Angstrom* shows that much of the anxiety that plagues Rabbit Angstrom throughout the tetralogy comes from his difficulty with a nation that is changing rapidly around him in the postwar era. In regard to Rabbit's predicament in *Rabbit, Run*, Updike states that there "was no painless dropping out of the Fifties' fraying but still tight social weave" (*Rabbit Angstrom* x). This "fraying" was the undercurrent of social unrest and disillusionment with postwar American society while part of the "social weave," from Rabbit's perspective, was the increasing pressure to belong and conform to a new postwar American ideal that Rabbit senses undermines his individuality. "Rabbit," Updike declares, "is, like the Underground Man, incorrigible, taking direction from his personal, also incorrigible God" (*Rabbit Angstrom*, xx).⁶⁹ Updike's conception of American identity, individuals with their private God, is what sets people free from the restrictive trappings of a politically constrained and enforced identity—for as long as this relationship is protected and respected, each individual, Updike states, is left to "their

⁶⁹ From Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella *Notes from the Underground*.

own minds and to enact in their own enlightened self-interest, with necessary respect to others” (*Higher Gossip*, 475). Where America has failed it has failed in its promise to live up to these ideals, which Updike posits as the spirit of the Protestant heritage, which is also ingrained into the ideals of the nation’s founding. If there is a utopia that humans are capable of creating, it is not the perfection of human behavior and human systems or a “static paradise” but a society that is renewable and allowed to change through democracy (476).

In *Rabbit Redux*, Skeeter insists that Rabbit understand black history in America. Without this understanding, Skeeter knows that Rabbit cannot empathize with his anger toward the United States and its institutions. One of Toni Morrison’s chief goals in her trilogy is to recover black history in order to force recognition of blacks’ vital contributions to the making of America. If American means white to Morrison, her trilogy challenges the white paradigm of American identity by recovering a lost past. Just as “somebody forgot to tell somebody something” about black history in the postwar period, Morrison declares “somebody has to tell somebody something” about blacks and black women’s role in American history (qtd. in Bland 286). First, like Skeeter, Morrison asserts that history and literature are essential to destroy harmful black stereotypes. Second, Morrison sees that the omission and/or the marginalization of blacks from and in American history will continue to deny blacks their American identity. In the climate of the Reagan Era, Morrison felt the threat of historical annihilation. In 1990, for example, Morrison stated, “if we don’t know it (what our past is) . . . then nobody in the world knows it” (qtd. in Bland 286). As *Paradise* illustrates, Morrison sees postwar middle-class black society repeating mainstream American culture, the world of Rabbit

Angstrom and Swede Levov, especially its patriarchal structure. Therefore, Morrison's retelling of black history focuses on the importance of black women's roles as leaders within the black community and as recorders and tellers of their history.

In telling Sethe's story in *Beloved*, Morrison counters the spectacle of the white narrative, which protects white hegemony; for instance, whites controlled the meaning of black history and the interpretation of how blacks experienced slavery. Baby Suggs attempts to help the ex-slaves redefine their identity outside of the plantation; however, just as Updike's *Rabbit Redux* demonstrates the tortured progress of race relations, *Beloved* shows the similar tortured progress of the black community's ability to cope with their limited, new freedom. Postwar assimilation for Morrison came at the price of accepting American identity on the premise of whites' narratives of history and literature. In *Beloved*, though, Morrison establishes the chronotope of the ship as a site of memory for its characters. Characters move through this collective memory of the ship as Morrison posits it as a site of rebirth, healing, and a symbol of American identity. At the end of *Paradise*, Morrison refrains from offering an alternative to the dystopia of Ruby, refusing to advocate another system—"I don't subscribe to patriarchy and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy" (Morrison, *Conversations* 141). Paradises imagined seem to offer nothing more than an alternate set of restrictions or exclusions, and perhaps this is why Morrison avoids attempting to theorize one. But, at any rate, the past must be first recovered in order to uncover aspects of American identity with diverse origins. These origins, Morrison shows, are rooted in the hidden history of not just black Americans, but also in the stories of women (who are erased from Haven's founding), black men, and other cultures and peoples that have lived within America's borders.

For Roth's trilogy, postwar American identity is the primary subject. Although *American Pastoral* centers on the downfall of Swede Levov in the Vietnam Era, the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, locates the beginnings of this tragedy in the immediate postwar era. In fact, Swede's life reads so tragically not just because his daughter, Merry, turns into a murderous radical, but also because Swede had embodied the best of the postwar American Dream. In Zuckerman's retelling, Swede, a Jewish American, had seamlessly assimilated into American society—something that the previous generation of Jews, Zuckerman claims, did not accomplish or even seek to accomplish. The Jews of Swede's community praise and worship him for his mainstream American qualities: his athletic achievements and his patriotic military service. But Roth deconstructs the idea that any identity can protect an individual from the machinations of history. There is no innocent American pastoral because postwar American wealth and power is predicated on militarism as its sinful involvement in the Vietnam War demonstrates; the Vietnam War had awakened the American berserk. Similar to Rabbit Angstrom, Swede is forced to deal with the reality of the worst of 1960s radicalism, and for Swede, this radicalism enralls his sixteen year-old daughter. Roth's target is not the Swede, who is simply "an instrument of history," but the postwar mythologizing of American identity (*American Pastoral* 5).

In Roth's *The Human Stain*, like Golden Gray in Morrison's *Jazz*, Coleman Silk believes he can control his own identity irrespective of history. Unlike Gray, Coleman enacts a plan and appears to have succeeded. However, Zuckerman's narrative reveals that Coleman's identity was never his own creation; rather, it was influenced by his father and the conditions of history. The racism of the postwar period persuaded Coleman that

he could not achieve his version of the American Dream as a black man. History, though, returns in Coleman's Freudian slip when he uses the word "spook" in class, an incident that begins his ordeal. In addition, as in *American Pastoral*, the Vietnam War haunts America as Lester Farley, a traumatized veteran, roams the American pastoral of rural New England and terrorizes Coleman and his lover Faunia, Lester's ex-wife. Nathan Zuckerman finally takes Murray Ringold's advice and ends his exile spent in the American pastoral exploring the trappings of its allure. The end of *The Human Stain* seems to stick a despairing period on the end of Roth's American trilogy. With Lester Farley in Arcadia, who wants to go there? However, Roth's trilogy attunes us to the propaganda, makes us aware of the nation's mythic fashioning, and demands that we critically look at the nation in which we live.

Updike, Morrison, and Roth examine the myth of the postwar paradise, and they posit that much of this myth is based on assimilation into an American identity while leaving behind individual identity as well as black and Jewish identities respectively. Therefore, the propaganda of the postwar counters the American ideal of a democratic and pluralistic nation. As I discuss in the Introduction, critics have written about the possibilities for and argued the productiveness of reading these authors in tandem. While reading these authors separately might help us understand the ethnic, gender, and religious explications that each author so richly illustrates, by reading them collectively, we might also see the larger picture of how these authors explore the questions of American identity that now surround us and will in the future. My subtitle is called "The Politics of American Identity," and throughout this dissertation I have attempted to demonstrate not only the social, cultural, and historical matrices of American identity, but

I have also attempted to provide a critical overview of its political origins and dimensions. From HUAC to Reaganism, the real political backlash against those who challenge its dominant paradigms shows that the consequences of how American identity disseminates in our nation are very real. John Updike, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth offer us literature that counters the exclusive and prescriptive narratives of national identity that are counterintuitive to the American spirit.

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